THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN

Mike Jahn

WINE, WOMEN AND WAR

It all began on an assignment in Alexandria.

Steve Austin was investigating a mysterious international entrepreneur named Findletter. The operation was not a success. Steve was injured – and the beautiful girl he had grown to love was dead.

Nothing could interest Steve in a new assignment or a new girl until he happened upon the man Findletter and discovered what his business was. He stole and sold weapons of world destruction to any buyer, if the price was right. Now, Steve had a patriotic reason, as well as a personal one, to get Findletter . . .

A novel by Mike Jahn

Based on the Universal Television Series
Created by Martin Caidin
Adapted from the episode written by
Glen A. Larson

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CHAPTER ONE

The lights of Alexandria shimmered on the surface of the dark Mediterranean like silver stones. It was a hot August night, perfect for harbor parties, and several noisy ones were going on at various spots around the city's Eastern Port, separated from the waters of the Khalig Abu Qir by a thin sandspit. Along this barrier beach, as throughout the long and elegant coast of this two-thousand-year old seaside community, modern high rise hotels mixed with yacht clubs, public anchorages, and old temples and palaces recognizable by their characteristic Islamic domes.

There was a light offshore breeze which stirred up a small chop on Abu Qir, a bay which had been relatively calm ever since August of 1798 when Viscount Nelson, then Rear Admiral of His Majesty's Navy, cornered the French fleet on those waters and decimated it, letting only two frigates escape. Steve Austin thought of the Battle of Abu Qir as he watched his target, a large yacht, slice through the bay and come to a mooring several hundred yards offshore.

Steve Austin, American astronaut, a member of the crew of Apollo 17, the last man to walk on the moon, was quite an extraordinary man, though the only ones who knew it were a few men highly placed in American intel-

ligence. To the world Austin was simply a former astronaut and test pilot who had suffered a tragic crash, and come out of it alive – nobody would say how – and since his recovery had been put out to pasture by NASA. Austin, to the world, was simply another American celebrity who made personal appearance and goodwill tours, usually to plug one or another aspect of the space program. To that end he had spent the previous ten days in Egypt, the last three of them in Alexandria. He had joined in a seminar in lunar astronomy at the University, had met in private sessions with a number of scientists, and had gone the tourist route. He swam at the excellent beach at Montazzah, visited Farouk's palace, now a museum, and played a good deal of tennis – all under the personal guidance of the daughter of the Pasha of Calib, a girl of whom Austin regretfully found himself becoming terribly fond.

Austin regretted having to leave her in such a mysterious fashion. He felt this not only because he genuinely liked the girl, an emotion he was allowing himself for the first time since recovering from his accident, but because he felt she could be useful. She truly possessed a measure of pro-American feeling, something very difficult to find among Arab dignitaries. Clearly, his feeling for her was making it difficult for him to just disappear. But that was what he had to do.

Moving quietly, Austin walked down the balcony away from the French doors which did such a poor job of concealing the noisy party inside, where a band played, hors d'oeuvres were consumed, and Egyptian officials of greater and lesser rank recalled their parts in the Yom Kippur War. All in all, quite a clamor was being made on the second floor Grand Ballroom of this most modern Alexandria hotel. It was easy for the American astronaut to slip alone onto the balcony and stare out into the Medterranean.

Austin found a spot at one end of the balcony where he could look straight down into the waters of Abu Qir and

yet be hidden from those at the party by two hideous potted palms. Why, he thought, in Egypt where palms are as prevalent as sand, do they have to pot them for safekeeping on the balcony? The question unanswered, he reached down and hiked up the right leg of his trousers. His hands used to this sort of exercise, he felt the spot on the right thigh where two pieces of plastiskin overlapped to form an invisible, watertight seam. He pushed open the seam with his fingers and groped about within the compartment it hid until he found the thin metal tube. He removed it from the leg and pushed his pants leg back into place. Looking around to assure privacy, he consulted his watch. It was time. Beneath the balcony, a small launch was completing its job of bringing the honored guest from his newly arrived yacht to the reception. Austin lifted the six-inch tube and aimed it out into the Mediterranean. When the sweep second hand of his watch struck 12, Austin pressed a small button on the miniaturized laser. Two bursts of highly coherent light, which despite the extremely small size of the instrument, spread to a beam width of less than a foot at a range of ten miles, pierced the night air. Austin rechecked his watch and repeated the performance.

A little more than seven miles at sea, the dark of the Abu Qir turned to white as an American nuclear submarine of the Polaris type broke the surface, the sleek gray hulk belching foam and sea spray. As the conning tower rose above the waves, a hatch clanged open. Commander Charles Dawson scrambled out, followed by Lieutenant David Meade. Dawson was a heavyset man whose white-ringed bald spot grew with age. Dawson had long since taken to wearing his cap constantly to cover the bald spot, which made him more uncomfortable and, hence, more irritable than one had to be in the spartan atmosphere of a submarine. And that night in the Abu Qir, Dawson was especially irritable. He had been dragged off a routine Mediterranean patrol to go into the coastal waters of another country, one that had been none

too friendly in recent years. That sort of thing could get a man killed, not to mention cause the loss of an entire U.S. nuclear submarine. And Dawson was doing this on orders which originated in some Washington intelligence agency of which he knew little. And, to top it all off, the whole thing was clearly impossible. Not just unlikely, but impossible. In a thirty-year career with the submarine service that started with running convoy protection in World War II, Dawson had seen nothing like it. With a mixture of annoyance and incredulity, he turned to his executive officer.

'Electronic binoculars,' he snapped.

Meade passed the awkwardly shaped and heavy instrument to his commander. Dawson held the binoculars to his eyes and, with difficulty, held them steady against the rocking of the ship. The photomultiplier components built into each of the twin optical systems multiplied light by a factor of ten million, thus making the entire coastline of Alexandria quite clear, bathed in a strange, green light. Dawson moved the instrument along the shore until he found the hotel.

Steve Austin was about to send another pair of signals when he was startled by a voice coming from down the balcony.

'Don't jump,' Tamara said.

Austin wheeled to stare at her, forgetting temporarily about the tiny laser in his hand. Tamara was beautiful, with black hair that hung straight down her back nearly to her waist, light olive skin, and thin lips which seemed ever to be smiling ironically. She was wearing a black slip as an evening dress, that custom having reached even to the Middle East, and her appearance thoroughly disarmed Austin.

'What's that?' she said, pointing at the laser.

'My mother told me never to go out at night without a flashlight,' Austin said, sticking the device in his pocket.

Tamara walked to Austin and put her hands on his shoulders.

'I'll admit this isn't the most stimulating party in Alexandria's history . . .'

'But then we haven't exactly had to depend on large groups to amuse us,' he said, frowning. 'I thought we agreed you wouldn't be here tonight.'

Ignoring the comment, she reached up and kissed him with an affection he only half heartedly returned. He didn't want her to have any part of this, to be anywhere near it.

'You said you weren't leaving until tomorrow,' she said sadly. 'Why is it I feel I've already lost you?'

'It's a temporary loss,' Austin said. '*If* you do as you're told. Now get back inside ... and slip out of here as quickly as you can.'

Tamara affected a hurt look.

'You order around the daughter of the Pasha of Calib, a man who owns a thousand camels?'

'You bet your royal humps,' Austin said, pulling her to him and kissing her deeply. Then he spun her around, aimed her at the door to the party, and gave her a light tap on the rear. She walked to the door, then turned to look back at Austin, the 'flashlight' once again in his hand. Out to sea, a tiny light blinked on and off. Tamara looked at it, then at Austin, then disappeared into the party to try to understand this new and strange behavior on the part of her American.

'That's Austin's signal,' Dawson said to his second in command, who was holding a signal light. 'Pack up the light and the binoculars. We give him twelve minutes to complete his mission and get out.' Then Dawson's voice turned rough and low, and he added, 'Not a second more.'

Once again alone on the balcony, Austin began to move. He stripped off his tuxedo jacket and cummerbund, then ripped off his shirt, shoes, and socks and tossed them into the water. He turned the jacket inside out and put it back on, zipping it up the front to reveal a wet suit. He reversed the cummerbund and buttoned it

in place over his head, forming a hood. After completing the inside-out process with his pants, Austin reached through a slit in the right leg of his wet suit, fumbled for the plastiskin seam, and reached inside it. From within his bionic leg he removed a length of plastic tubing attached to a mouthpiece and touched a button to start the air flow. He removed a snap-open face mask, and slipped it over his eyes. Then he replaced the miniature laser in the pouch and resealed the plastiskin. Damned handy, he thought, having a built-in tool chest. Finally he pulled open a plastiskin seal on the bottom of each of his feet, and from it pulled snap-open swim fins fabricated of woven metal. He locked them into place, slipped the mouthpiece between his teeth, and launched himself from the balcony.

He dropped straight down two stories and sank feet first into fifteen feet of water. Without wasting a second, he began to make for the yacht, at its mooring two hundred yards offshore.

Austin knew little of the yacht, other than that she was sixty-five feet long and seventeen feet wide. He knew the basic layout of the ship – had it drawn on the sleeve of his wet suit in case he forgot – and he knew that in the aft salon there was a wall safe. In that wall safe was something Austin was to get. A book of some sort. That was all he knew. Austin found the mooring cable and worked his way up it until he reached the bow. There was an armed guard on the port catwalk, and one on the starboard. Austin decided to go up the middle. He quickly swam under the length of the yacht and came to the surface behind the transom. There was a swimmer's perch a foot above the waterline across the width of the transom. He climbed up on it. Standing, he could then peer into the aft salon, which was dark. Austin closed his right eye and concentrated on his left. Silently, within the artificial eyeball, a photomultiplier tube one hundredth the size of the one in Commander Dawson's electronic binoculars, but just as effective, began to scan the room through

the convenience of a zoom lens. Through the green glow, Austin spotted the safe, in the wall near the door that led up to the deck. The salon had plexiglass windows on three sides. Austin reached with his left arm and worked his fingers under one of the plexiglass panels. He waited until the music at the party reached a crescendo then with one smooth motion ripped off the panel and dropped it into the water.

Austin climbed into the salon and stepped quickly to the safe. Next to the safe, a door led to the passageway. A light shone under the door. Austin again waited for the music to hit a peak, then grabbed the handle of the safe. Bracing his left foot against the wall, he yanked hard on the safe handle. With a loud, tearing noise the safe, its door intact, pulled out of the wall. Austin swore quietly and laid it down on the floor. With his foot braced this time on the edge of the safe, he pulled one more time on the handle. Austin pulled straight up with his left arm, his bionic arm, and with a screech of agonized metal the door was torn off. Austin peered inside, unable to believe what he saw. The safe was empty.

Up on the deck of the yacht, the guard who was patrolling the port catwalk suddenly stopped, cocked his head toward the stern, and then called over to his counterpart on the other side of the ship.

'Did you hear something?' he asked.

The party had been noisy from the start. When an Egyptian hotel band is hired to play contemporary popular songs, noise is often the result. But by the time Arlen Findletter entered, surrounded by his entourage of guards and girls, the word *noise* was no longer appropriate. Cacophony was more like it, the band's contribution being matched by a lively political debate among several by-then drunken Arabs. Findletter looked disapproving, but that appearance may have been with him since birth. He was tall, thin, with a harsh, angular face augmented with a quiet, business-like stare. He was wear-

ing evening clothes, but then Findletter would look out of place in anything less than formal attire.

When he entered, the host, Abdul Masaha, a small, heavyset man whose jacket was studded with colorful medals, ran up to Findletter, his arms out. Masaha embraced Findletter despite the latter's apparent revulsion at the kindness.

'Ah, my guest of honor,' Masaha said. 'Mr Findletter, welcome to the land of the Nile. I trust you had a pleasant voyage.'

Findletter nodded with passive cordiality. He scanned the room with a look of disdain.

'The voyage,' he said, carefully, 'was comfortable.'

'I want this to be the beginning of a long and profitable relationship for both of us,' Masaha said. 'We have the finest caviar, champagne –'

Suddenly Findletter's reserve broke down.

'I don't like to celebrate until *after* the business at hand has been settled,' he snapped.

Masaha looked bewildered.

'But this party –' he pleaded.

'Is premature,' Findletter said. 'At the moment you are but a *prospective* customer.'

Masaha found himself being embarrassed in front of his friends and associates. Any position of wealth and power is but a tenuous one in the stormy world of Middle Eastern politics, and a man becomes inordinately afraid of embarrassment. Confronted with his guest-of-honor's coldness, Masaha himself turned cool.

'My dear Mr Findletter,' he said, 'your wired instructions for this party were followed to the letter.'

'Wire? I sent no wire,' Findletter said. 'Other than the arrival time of my boat this evening.'

Masaha stared at Findletter as one stares at a lunatic.

'Are you telling me that you did not demand a state party with precise requirements up to and including the size of the orchestra and the precise selections you wished played at precise moments in the evening?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Findletter said. 'I'm a business man, not a party-goer.'

Once again, the Arab looked bewildered.

'Well, if *you* didn't require this party, who did?' he said.

At that precise moment, the bandleader consulted his watch, tapped his baton on the music stand, and began to play 'The Stars and Stripes Forever.' Both Findletter and Masaha stared at the orchestra with growing realization. Suddenly Masaha exploded, raced toward the bandleader, ripped the music from his hands, and hurled it to the floor. The orchestra faltered and stopped playing. As silence descended over the Grand Ballroom, those inside could hear the sound of gunfire echoing over the harbor. Findletter walked briskly to the balcony and stared across the water at his yacht.

CHAPTER TWO

The guard who heard the sound of Austin's ripping open the door to the safe had failed to win sympathy from his comrade, so he decided to investigate alone. He walked aft, then stepped down into the passageway which led to the aft salon. The guard stopped outside the door and clicked off the safety on his machine gun. Austin, still fuming over the emptiness of the safe he had waited so long to crack, heard the click and saw the shadow of the guard's feet interrupt the flow of light under the door. Silently, Austin stepped to within striking distance of the door. When he saw the doorknob begin to turn, he leaned onto his right leg and as the guard pulled open the door, kicked the door with his left leg. The door groaned, snapped from its hinges and tore off, all in a split second! It caught the guard in the chest and hurled him across the narrow hallway, through the thin-paneled wall and into the galley. He fell, unconscious, to the galley floor, shards and scraps of paneling around him. As he fell, the gun went off, peppering the ceiling of the passageway and galley with shots.

The second guard came on the run. Austin heard his footfalls on the steps from the starboard catwalk to the passageway, and turned looking for a weapon. He found the twisted remains of the safe, and hefted it with his

bionic arm. As the guard turned into the passageway, Austin hurled the safe at him. The metal box caught the guard in the stomach and threw him up the three steps to the catwalk, over the rail, and into the bay. He was dead before he hit the water. Austin stepped to the gaping hole where he had torn the plexiglass from its rivets. He could see a small crowd of people gathered on the balcony of the hotel, looking in his direction, and he thought he heard somebody say something about calling the patrol boats. He stepped out of the window and lowered himself onto the swimmer's perch.

On the balcony, somebody was pointing at him. Austin fixed his mouthpiece and face mask in position. He was about to drop into the water when he recalled the empty safe. *Sons of bitches*, he thought. He reached into the wet suit, through the plastiskin seal, and withdrew a small, cylindrical metal container. On one end of it was a dial calibrated from zero to thirty. Austin set the dial at thirty, reached to his right, unscrewed the cap from the tube leading to the gas tank, and dropped the cylinder into the tube. Then he gave a glance toward the crowd on the balcony and fell forward into the cool water at Abu Qir. Twenty three seconds later, Arlen Findletter watched his yacht disappear from the face of the sea.

On the bridge of the American submarine, Lieutenant Meade was becoming nervous. He had taken a report from below which unsettled him, and cautiously he reported it to his skipper.

'Radar reports patrol boats all over the harbor, sir,' he said.

'I see them,' Commander Dawson said tersely. He had the electronic binoculars to his eyes and was using them to study the burning oil slick which was all that remained of the yacht.

Meade had been brooding over his next question for some time, and he finally worked up the nerve to ask it.

'Sir, do you mind telling me,' he asked 'how we're

going to get close enough to pick up this Austin fellow without running into the patrol boats? War book says they're all equipped with short range radar.'

'Orders say he's going to swim out,' Dawson said quietly.

'It'd take him *four hours* to swim that distance.'

'Orders say he'll do it in six minutes,' the commander said.

Meade thought for a moment, then turned, wide-eyed to his captain.

'Sir, to do that he'd have to swim at better than thirty-five knots. That's impossible!'

Dawson laid down the electronic binoculars and stared at his executive officer with a tired look.

'I know that,' he said, 'and you know that, Lieutenant But apparently some wizard in Washington doesn't know that. So we wait our assigned twelve minutes ... make that seven minutes, now ... and then we get the hell out of here.'

Egyptian patrol boats, like the vessels of many countries, tend to be castoffs from the Soviet navy or confiscated and rebuilt private yachts. The patrol boat that bore down on Steve Austin was one of the latter. It once was a sixty foot sport fisherman, but had been taken by the govern ment and refitted from the deck up. It had two sea-to sea rocket launchers, mounted forward, two 30 mm guns amidships, and a pair of depth charge ejectors aft. A bridge, mounted amidships, held the captain, a helms man, and a sonar man, who had an urgent message for his skipper.

'Underwater target on the sonar, sir,' he said, 'at thirty feet and moving on a course of one-five-zero.'

'Come around to one-eight-four and prepare depth charges,' the captain barked.

The boat swung to a new course, its wake cutting a silver swath across Abu Qir. Underneath and ahead of the craft, Austin swam for his life. His two bionic legs, with more power than any man has ever possessed, beat

with fantastic speed steadily against the water, his hands in front providing directional guidance.

The patrol boat was three to five knots slower than he was. While Austin could swim underwater at thirty five to thirty-seven knots, the patrol boat could make at best thirty-two. But it was sailing an intersecting course, and as a result their meeting was inevitable. Austin heard the sound of turning screws and increased his efforts. The bionic legs were a part of him now. For a long time after they were installed, he had felt them as alien, assists to his normal functions. When he performed some function such as increasing his speed, the legs seemed to him like a fast car. He willed it, and it happened, but it wasn't really he who was going fast. Now, they had become *his* legs, and he had grown used to being able to swim at thirty-five knots for an indefinite period of time without tiring. But the depth charges, they were a different matter. He could hear them. When the patrol boat was several hundred yards away and closing from the starboard quarter, Austin could hear the charges detonating in the wake of the speeding craft. He thought of swimming deeper, but realised the bay wasn't deep enough to allow him protection from the concussion of the charges.

Changing course significantly was out of the question, as he had but a few minutes to make the submarine. He simply had to swim like hell straight ahead, and do the best he could.

The patrol boat passed over Austin when he was half way to the sub. Depth charges exploded around him and, in a desperate effort to avoid them, he dived for the bottom, estimated at that point to be seventy feet below mean high water. He was too slow. One charge exploded to his right and knocked the wind out of him, blowing part of the wet suit open and leaving him biting into the mouthpiece, gasping for breath. Another depth charge exploded to his left, tearing some of the plastiskin from his bionic left arm, leaving him with the odd sensation

which wasn't pain but which he had come to identify as being pain, and exposing the wires, servos, and other components of the arm. Still he swam on.

Above him, the captain of the Egyptian patrol boat had grown suspicious and had pushed the sonarman aside so that he, himself, could take a look at the target they had pursued so diligently.

'The target is still moving very fast,' the sonarman said.

'Let me see that,' the captain growled. He studied the instrument for a while, then bellowed, 'That target is moving at least thirty-five miles an hour! You imbecile, you're tracking a shark!'

'But there's no other target around,' the sonar technician protested.

'Then he must have reached shore,' the captain said. 'Order all boats to three-five-zero!'

Aboard the American submarine, similar confusion reigned.

'I don't see how any man could swim through that,' Commander Dawson said, staring at the crisscrossing patrol boats and the spray from the depth-charge explosions.

'Two minutes to dive, sir,' Lieutenant Meade said.

'Let's take her in a little closer.'

'If those patrol boats swing out much farther, they'll pick us up on their radar,' Meade protested.

The commander agreed. 'Give the standby to dive,' he said.

Dawson made one last sweep of the harbor with the binoculars, then handed them to Meade. 'He didn't make it,' Dawson said. 'Let's get out of here.'

But Meade was staring incredulously at an interruption in the wave pattern off the port beam. It was Austin, on the surface and swimming steadily towards the sub.

'Captain,' Meade said quietly.

Dawson turned and saw Austin. 'Medics on deck,' he yelled, 'flank speed.' Within a minute, the specially briefed medics had Austin safely below decks. It was not

a minute too soon. The sonar technician on the Egyptian patrol boat that had come so close to destroying the man who had cost the government of the United States more than six million dollars to create had a message for his captain.

'That shark we were chasing, sir,' he said with more than a trace of smugness, 'It's rendezvousing with another target , , , a large target, sir.'

The Egyptian captain looked frantically across the sea, too late to do anything but fume.

'We're picking up patrol boats,' Lieutenant Meade called to Commander Dawson. 'We're within their radar now.'

'Take her down,' Dawson said, 'let's get out of here.'

The submarine claxon horn screeched a warning, hatches were closed and decks began to swamp as the American submarine sank into the safety of Abu Qir, her bow pointed out into the heart of the vast Mediterranean.

On the balcony of the Alexandria hotel, Arlen Findletter was looking for a scapegoat. 'I come here to sell you weapons,' he said, with controlled wrath, 'that will enable you to annihilate your enemies, and this is the greeting I receive . . .'

'Can you reasonably think I could have anything to do with this?' Masaha pleaded, his formal attire appearing wilted.

'We are in your country,' Findletter said. 'If you are not responsible, then who is?'

At that moment, an aide who also was decorated with numerous medals rushed to Masaha and handed him a piece of paper. The Arab read it.

'Here is your answer,' Masaha said. 'A submarine has been detected off our coast.'

'Whose submarine?' Findletter asked.

'I can't be sure. But we did have a state visitor this past week. An American . . . a former astronaut. A curious co-

incidence ... It would be enlightening to know if he is still with us.'

Masaha spoke then to the aide. 'Find the American,' he said, 'or find anyone who might know of his whereabouts. I know he was here before. I would very much like to know where he is now.'

The aide turned and departed, leaving the two men to stare, baffled, out to sea.

Inside the submarine infirmary, two medics worked to revive Austin, who lapsed into shock shortly after being hauled aboard the submarine. Several scars from shrapnel crossed his chest, the wind had been knocked out of him a few times, and he was exhausted. Moreover, the plastiskin had been ripped from much of his left arm exposing the network of wires, pulleys, sensors, and servos which worked the bionic limb. In the entrance to the infirmary, Lieutenant Meade was gaping at the bionic arm, his face devoid of any color. Commander Dawson walked slowly to a position behind Meade, his face similarly ashen.

'Captain?' Meade asked, without taking his eyes off Austin's arm.

Dawson put his arm around Meade's shoulder and led him from the infirmary. In a low and very serious voice, he instructed the younger man. 'I've just received a priority red signal from Washington,' he said. 'We're to forget what we saw here. Not just for now, but forever. And you're to get on the horn and tell Air-Evac that if they don't break every record getting here ... we're going to lose what must be the most valuable man in the world!'

CHAPTER THREE

Steve Austin was a cyborg, half man and half mechanism, a living tribute to the new science of bionics and the resourcefulness of American intelligence agencies. The complex web of events that made Austin what he was began in an instant. After flying the Apollo 17 mission, Austin returned to the life of a test pilot. His main mission in that capacity was to test a nasty little creation called the M3F5, a precursor to the space shuttle which one day would move men and equipment from earth to orbiting space station and back with the ease of a New York-to Chicago jet. The silver dart containing Austin rode from the floor of Rogers Dry Lake in California on the underwing of a giant B 52. Then Austin loosed the craft from its mother ship and pushed it up to skim the fringes of space, as the projected space shuttle would have to do a decade on.

Austin skimmed through airless and weightless space, the sensation of flying being his main love and joy. But upon reentry, the M3F5 began a yawing motion which Austin found himself unable to control. The passage from supersonic to subsonic speed was always a dangerous one, and this time the inevitable turbulence caught the ship and its pilot. Colonel Steve Austin, attempting to see the out-of-control ship through its one and only possible

landing attempt, slammed into the hard floor of Rogers Dry Lake, turning cartwheels, breaking apart, disintegrating, his last words a frantic radio message consisting of the desperately functional words, 'She's breaking up!'

When Austin was pulled from the flaming wreck by medics, he was a triple amputee, having lost both legs and his left arm. His left eye was gone, torn from its socket by the same piece of flying metal that severed several ribs and damaged his heart. His jaw was smashed, and most of his teeth gone. His skull was fractured. He was, mercifully, unconscious. He was flown to the Bionics Research Laboratory, carved deep into the Rocky Mountains north of Colorado Springs, where the forces of science and government were marshaling. Science, for the knowledge of how to repair this man; in fact, how to make him better than he had been. Government, for the funding required.

Bionics was a new science, an amalgam of several sciences. The word itself derived from Greek roots meaning 'in a manner simulating life.' When bionics sprouted in the late 1950s, it dedicated itself to the study of how living things operate. Scientists strove to use living mechanisms as models for the construction of mechanical and electronic mechanisms performing identical functions. The fact that a human hand works is living proof to a bionic engineer that a properly constructed hardware mechanism based on the same principle will also work. As the science of bionics grew, researchers turned even more from the study of living mechanisms to the construction of mechanical and electronic versions of these structures. Gradually, bionics came to include not only the life sciences, but cybernetics, information theory, mechanical and electronic engineering, and biology. In the Colorado facility, scientists had reduced to computer language every single element of construction and movement of, for example, a human hand. Though the amount of information taxed its abilities, eventually the computer belched forth a plan for constructing not an

artificial hand, but a bionic hand. And a bionic arm, and a bionic leg. The technology had been building for over a decade. By the dawn of the 1970s they had the technology.The crash of the M3F5 brought them the man.

That was when the government stepped in. A research facility in Colorado cannot afford or justify a multi million-dollar expenditure on one man for the purposes of pure science. In other words, there was no excuse to spend all that money to repair Steve Austin, when the nation's VA hospitals were already crowded with mul tiple amputees. There had to be another reason. The government, in the form of Jonathan McKay, provided it. McKay was the director of the Office of Special Operations, an umbrella organization encompassing the country's military and civilian intelligence agencies. Thirty years of intelligence and espionage work, ranging from World War II's OSS to CIA, British Intelligence, and Interpol, made McKay the perfect combination of administrator, diplomat, detective, and killer. When McKay heard of Austin's crash, he called in his right hand man, Oscar Goldman, a thin, stiff spined and stoical man. Goldman was a former paratrooper and Ranger who had somehow acquired an extraordinary grasp of weapons technology and an ability to correlate an enormous quantity of facts from various disciplines. Goldman also had an uncanny ability to convert people from what they were into people useful to OSO. Immediately upon hearing of Steve Austin, Goldman flew to Colorado to make arrangements. The arrangements were simple. The scientists of the Bionic Research Laboratory would make Austin better than he had been; Goldman would place at their disposal the sum of six million dollars with which to do it. The catch was likewise simple. Austin would apply his newly acquired and quite extraordinary powers to the purposes of OSO. The scientists and Goldman agreed, and began to work. Later, they would tell Austin about it.

Under the guidance of Dr Rudy Wells, the NASA

flight surgeon who picked up the pieces after the near-fatal crash, who was also an old friend and confidant of Austin, the task of creating the first cyborg was begun. They kept Austin unconscious for weeks, using electro-sleep techniques pioneered by the Russians and only recently adopted in the States. The damaged heart valve was replaced by a Hufnagel valve and supporting internal apparatus. The crushed skull was repaired with a cesium plate, surrounded by spongy lawyers to protect the brain. The plate gave Austin the capacity to endure a blow ten times harder than the one that had crushed the original bone. His smashed ribs were removed and replaced with ribs fabricated of vitallium and joined with artificial tendons, the whole cage of ribs then joined to the breastbone with silastic, a form of silicone rubber. The ribs also were embedded with extremely fine wire which could function as an excellent radio antenna.

Austin's crushed jaw was repaired with an amalgam of metal, ceramic, and plastic. His left eye was replaced at first with a miniature automatic camera. Later, when rapid pace developments in microcircuitry allowed it, a tiny photomultiplier tube and zoom lens apparatus was built into a plastic eyeball and tied in to Austin's optic nerve. It allowed him to regain stereoscopic vision and more: the multiplier increased the intensity of light by a factor of ten million when Austin willed it, and the zoom lens could increase the optical magnification by a factor of up to twenty. The photomultiplier tube, used most often to allow optical astronomers to push the capabilities of their instruments out nearly to the edge of the universe, now would allow Steve Austin not only to see, but to see in the dark.

But the real miracles were found in the bionic limbs, the two legs and the left arm. To Austin's arm and leg stumps they double engaged the bionic and natural bones to allow support for the extra strength the limbs would provide. They connected actual nerves and muscles with bionic nerves and muscles, amplifying the

natural nerve signals to the level required to run the various components of the limbs. To perform this amplification, the doctors installed small, nuclear-powered generators which provided the necessary voltage. The generators fed power through the apparatus which the computer said would duplicate the actions of life: pulleys and cables, joints and limbs and, to provide protection, a casing of alloys and a plastiskin covering to duplicate living skin. Human hairs were embedded, and there was a unique photochemical dye treatment which even allowed the skin to tan somewhat when exposed to the sun.

But a bionic limb, especially one with extraordinary strength, is only as good as its controlling system. Austin's arm could crush a man's hand as easily as it could squash a grape. Into the fingertips, and the bottoms of the feet, in fact, all along the skin, doctors installed an elaborate array of sensors which fed back impulses into miniaturized servo-mechanisms. A servo is a fancy version of the principle used in a house-hold thermostat. For example, in Austin's arm it fed a tiny portion of the output signal into an error-measuring device (the sensor), which in turn activated the servo to bring to zero the difference between desired and actual output. All this occurred in a tiny fraction of a second, so when Austin brought pressure to bear upon, say a wall safe, his bionic limb used only as much force was was necessary. The same hand that could punch through a concrete wall could also caress a lover's skin.

The entire apparatus was run through small computers in the limbs. The transformation of Steve Austin, astronaut, to Steve Austin, cyborg, was technically complete. Of course, it took Austin time to adjust to his new body. There were months of awkwardness, component malfunctions, testing and retesting, before he learned how to use his new equipment. What took longer was what the doctors euphemistically termed Austin's emotional adjustment.

In short, he was furious. When first told that he was a

triple amputee, in his own words 'a basket case,' Austin made a clumsy and unsuccessful attempt at suicide. When told by Rudy Wells that he could be rebuilt, he was disbelieving, incredulous, and offended. Such things were clearly impossible. So Wells put him out and did it anyway. And then, months later when Austin became convinced of the reality of his new-found capabilities, he was distant, brooding. He was a man who loved flying and the sense of being free. He had lost that pleasure and, after a long struggle, regained it. Now he was being converted into some kind of intelligence officer, a secret agent, an operative, all because he owed something his life – to the people who had paid to give him back his life. Once again he had lost his freedom. He was a man again, but a man whose life, whose freedom to fly, was controlled at the whim of one Oscar Goldman. Austin *owed* him. He resented it, but he knew it had to be. And being a good Air Force officer, he went along. Austin bitched, he complained, he broke rules, he cursed Goldman, but in the end he did as he was told. Steve Austin was once again a man, the science of bionics had proved itself, and Oscar Goldman finally had his cyborg.

CHAPTER FOUR

A black Lincoln limousine pulled to an abrupt halt outside a modern building which bore the name of the National Medical Center. It was a relatively cool September night in the nation's capital. The rear door was flung open, and two young men dressed in durable utilitarian suits jumped out. One came to a position of alert vigilance beside the car door, and the second moved quickly to open the hospital door. Without a glance toward either of them, Oscar Goldman stepped from the limousine and walked briskly into the hospital. Goldman was an imposing figure despite his thin frame. Five-foot-five-inch height, thinning black hair, and black-framed glasses. He had a Teutonic, commanding look and, of course, the position of authority with which to back it up. As he entered the hospital, the OSO aide who had held the door for him followed.

Goldman and his assistant stepped down a hall and into an elevator. Wordlessly, they exited onto the antiseptic corridors of the third floor. A short way down the hall were two glass doors marked with a sign reading 'Restricted Area.' Two armed military policemen snapped to attention upon recognizing Goldman, who passed by them and through the doors without acknowledging their presence. Goldman walked through another set of

double doors, these marked 'Special Bionics Section,' leaving his young aide to wait outside. Finally the OSO official came to a halt outside the door to a hospital room.

The room was in semi-darkness. A circle of light from a large reading lamp illuminated the bed in which Steve Austin lay talking with his friend and doctor, Rudy Wells. Wells heard the footfalls and turned to intercept Goldman. He pushed the OSO man into the hall, out of range of Austin's ears.

'What's the bottom line?' Goldman asked.

'His physical condition,' Wells said, 'has been remedied.'

Goldman's face brightened, a rare occurrence.

'Then he's ready to go out again!'

Wells was more of an old fashioned doctor than one expects to find in such programs as bionics. Though he was largely responsible for turning Steve Austin into what he was, Wells sought continually to preserve his patient's emotional well-being At that time, such a task involved keeping him away from Oscar Goldman and, especially, away from the work of the OSO. Goldman's persistent inclination to treat Austin as a machine angered the doctor.

'Look, Oscar . . .'

But Goldman ignored the warning, and stepped around Wells into the hospital room. Austin was in bed, cranked up into a semi-sitting position, sipping from a glass.

Austin kept his eyes lowered when Goldman entered, preferring to stare into the glass.

'Well, would you look at this,' Goldman said, trying without success to be cheerful, 'they're turning an entire country upside down looking for you and here you are, pretty as you please, tugging on a lemonade.'

'We've got some talking to do,' Austin said, still without looking up.

'Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor,' Goldman said.

Austin looked up and glared at Goldman.

'Oscar,' he said, sharply, 'that safe was empty.'

Goldman shrugged. 'What we were after simply wasn't where it was supposed to be. We'll simply ... have to try again.'

Austin was dumbfounded. 'You put me through four weeks of cloak and dagger, pit me against the entire Egyptian navy, and you're going to stand there and tell me it was all a mistake?'

'You performed your end of the mission brilliantly,' Goldman said quickly. 'The fact that the safe was empty is not your concern. Higher heads will roll for that.' To illustrate the point, Goldman ran his index finger across his throat.

'What was supposed to be in that safe that was worth so many necks?' Austin asked. 'Who owned that boat?'

'Steve, our people function on a need-to-know basis,' Goldman said. 'You were told where the boat would be located and how to find the safe. Knowing any more than that would not have helped you, either then or now. That's the way we operate.'

'That's not the way I operate,' Austin snapped.

Goldman's voice took on a condescending tone.

'You're special, Steve,' he said, 'but not that special. I can't change the rules for one man.'

Austin's face tightened with rage.

'Then get yourself another man,' he snapped. At that instant, the glass in Austin's hand shattered into plastic confetti, spraying plastic and water across the bed. Wells quickly moved into the room and put his hand on Austin's arm.

'Steve, take it easy ...'

'I am taking it easy,' Austin said. 'If I'd meant to break that glass, it would be powder!'

'I don't think I understand,' Wells said. 'If you didn't mean to break it ...'

'It's simple, Doctor. The equipment you gave me is faulty. Just like the thinking around here.'

Goldman managed a tolerant smile. Austin had never been easy to talk into anything.

'This isn't accomplishing anything,' he said. 'You're tired, and upset. You need some time off.' He turned to leave.

'Before we discuss any time off,' Austin said, 'there's some unfinished business.'

Goldman turned to face him again.

'The contents of the safe?'

'I'm talking about the girl,' Austin said. 'Tamara. The one you said might be sympathetic . . .'

Goldman and Wells exchanged looks of concern. After a second, Wells's expression changed to embarrassment and he turned away from the bed.

'She was,' Austin said, 'and I made her a promise.'

'What sort of promise?' Goldman asked.

'That we'd get her out of there.'

Goldman hesitated a long second, as if he were searching his soul.

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' he said quietly.

'Why?'

'She's dead.'

Austin closed his eyes and shut out the sight of the others in the room.

'I'm sorry, Steve,' Goldman said.

Austin opened his eyes and glared at Goldman.

'Who did it?'

'We don't know yet,' Goldman replied. 'But we will. I didn't know she was that . . . important to you.'

Austin raised himself to a full sitting position.

'Get out of here, Oscar,' Austin said quietly, 'and don't come to me for anything until you have the name of the man who killed Tamara.'

Goldman looked as if he were about to speak, but Wells stopped him and ushered him out of the room.

'We'll leave you alone,' Wells said. 'I'll see you in the morning.' Austin did not reply, and the two men closed the door behind them.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was a cool September morning, a relief after the monotonous heat wave that had marked the final two weeks of August. Austin was in the bionics laboratory, dressed in a bright blue sweatsuit. Around him was an array of gleaming machines, all sorts of exercise equipment, and a variety of electronic devices. Austin was running on a treadmill. In front of him and to one side, a digital readout indicated Austin's speed in miles per hour. The readout flashed 50, then 55 and 56. When it passed 57 and flashed 58, Rudy Wells raised his hand.

'Steve, slow down. You'll break the machine.'

Austin ran slower and slower, finally slowing to a brisk walk and then halting entirely. Wells was shaking his head in disbelief.

'I did it,' he said, 'and I still don't believe it.'

'What's the matter?' Austin asked.

He turned and looked at Wells. He was barely winded.

'Nothing's the matter. You're not just as good as new, you're better. Those new booster gyros have improved your balance to a point where I'm afraid to find out what your ceiling is.'

Wells flicked a switch, and the digital readout went blank.

'Steve, I'm sorry ... about the girl,' Wells said, his head

lowered. 'I'm sorry ... about what we've gotten you into. There's a part of me ... the unscientific part ... that wishes it'd never happened.'

'Why, Rudy?' Austin exclaimed. 'Why is she dead? She didn't do anything but provide me with the kind of information they pass out at the Egyptian tour center.'

'She'd been seen with you. Oscar thinks ... they tried to make her talk.'

Austin's face went white, and he walked slowly to the wall and stood facing it. Wells could see his left hand curling into a fist.

'Look, Steve ...'

Without hearing the older man, Austin cocked his fist and rammed it into the wall. There was a split second of ear shattering noise as four inches of brick and plaster exploded outward, scaring the wits out of two MPs standing in the hall. By the time the guards, pistols drawn, burst into the room, Wells had his hand up to stop them.

'It's all right. It's all right. Resume your posts.'

Austin turned from the wall and walked slowly to a weight lifting machine set up for one-arm curls. Without paying attention to the arrival or exit of the guards, he began to idly lift the weight, marked at 200 pounds.

'Steve, I'm worried about you,' Wells said. 'We've learned to perform miracles in repairing a man's body, but his mind is still the greatest tabernacle of all. If you continue to take your work this personally ...'

Austin dropped the weights, and they fell to the floor with a resounding crash.

'You're missing the point, Rudy,' he yelled. 'It's the people around here who don't take it personally enough. We're dealing with *real lives* out there in the field! One of them was just snuffed out. It was a person for whom I cared a lot. The fact that Oscar didn't know her doesn't make her any less real. How do I tell myself her death was reasonable when I don't even know what the mission was about?'

Wells gave a weary shrug.

'Sometimes we have to do things on blind faith.'

'It's too late for that, Rudy. The stakes in this world have changed. Reasonable men have to start responding to conscience, not blind faith.'

'I can't argue with that,' Wells said, 'but don't sell Oscar short. He's a good man.'

Of course he was a good man, Austin thought. They were all good men. But good men serving with blind faith in the righteousness of their cause often do a lot of harm. Austin liked Wells. The older, heavyset man with the salt-and-pepper beard seemed at times more like a country doctor than a project scientist. It was Wells who, when Austin was maimed and unconscious, made the decision to proceed with the bionic transformation. And it was Wells who later, when Austin was capable of understanding what had happened and was happening to him, persuaded him to serve the cause of this Oscar Goldman who had so eagerly contributed six million dollars to the restoration of his life.

When Austin first was brought from unconsciousness after the crash and began abusing the doctors who were trying to push upon him a miracle cure he considered quite impossible, it was Wells who shook him by yelling, 'Dammit, Steve, nobody *forced* you into the cockpit of that plane.'

But now Austin feared that Wells was being drawn away from his humanity into the cold and calculating world of international espionage, and that the culprit was Oscar Goldman.

'How far would Oscar go to fulfill a mission?' he asked, increasing the weight on the arm-curl machine to 500 pounds and hefting it with his left arm. 'What's his limit?'

'I don't think anybody can know what his limit is,' Wells said. 'I don't know if he has one. Steve, you've been through a dreadful emotional experience, the girl and all . . . Oscar has arranged for you to have a rest.'

'What's the catch?' Austin asked, increasing the weight

to 700 pounds and, with some difficulty, lifting it.

'No catch,' Wells said. 'You'll have the full run of this floor, Gymnasium, movies, food, drink ... anything you need.'

'The full run of this *floor*?' Austin said incredulously.

'Security, Steve. We can't let you leave this protected area until the mission you were a part of is completed.'

'I'm glad you said "were," ' Austin replied, caustically, dropping the weights; 700 pounds hit the floor with a bang that made Wells wince.

'At this point in my life I owe you everything, Rudy. You picked up the pieces and put me back together again. But I'm nobody's robot. Not yours, not Oscar Goldman's. Not anybody's.'

Austin left the room and walked into the corridor. He was moving swiftly down the hall toward his room when, suddenly, through the guarded glass doors he spied a familiar face. It was Harry Donner, an old friend, a buddy and, incidentally, a member of Goldman's OSO team.

Donner, a handsome if unathletic thirty five, was leaning over a drinking fountain.

'Harry?' Austin called.

Donner looked up past the MPs.

'Steve Austin,' he said, smiling.

Donner headed for Austin, but was stopped at the doors by the MPs. His smile faded.

'Take it easy, fellas,' he said. 'We're all on the same side ... I think.'

'It's all right,' Austin said. 'We're old friends.'

'I'm sorry, sir, I have to ask for your clearance,' one of the guards said.

'Five level high enough?' Donner replied.

'May I see it?'

Donner produced his wallet, flashed it open, and let the guard glance at the identification.

'All right, sir, you can talk to Colonel Austin ... but only here outside the lab.'

Donner eyed the guard with disdain. 'Anything you say . . . corporal,' he said. The guard returned to his post.

'From the way they've got you cordoned off, it'd be easier to get in to see God,' Donner said. 'What gives?'

'Just another of those NASA quarantines,' Austin said with a shrug. 'What about you?'

'Overseas button. They pushed that little button that says Harry Donner, and I guess I'm going to be stuck in Tokyo for a while.'

'You make it sound like Devil's Island.'

'Ordinarily, I'd be tickled pink,' Donner said, then lowered his voice and looked at Austin with a conspiratorial grin. 'But I had some plans. You remember Tony Doyle's place in the Bahamas? I've got it rented for two weeks.'

'Tony Doyle's place? I guess I missed out on that one.'

'Then you missed out on Paradise,' Donner said, a far-away look in his eyes. 'I mean, this is it . . . the whitest sands, the bluest waters . . . fish a mile long . . . what can I tell you? It's all there and paid for and I'm . . .'

Austin gave a glance back toward the MPs, threw an arm around Donner's shoulders, and maneuvered him down the corridor.

'Harry, I think we can do some business.'

CHAPTER SIX

It was night. Austin was dressed in slacks and a light knit shirt. He opened his wallet and flipped through it checking money, credit cards, and driver's license. Then he slipped it into his pocket. He opened the door to his room. The 'Do Not Disturb' sign was securely in place. Austin locked the door from the inside, lifted a suitcase from the bed, and walked to the window. He raised the blinds and thrust aside the draperies. Setting the case down on the floor, he pushed open the window. A series of iron bars, each about six inches apart, blocked his exit. He braced his feet against the floor and pushed outward with his bionic arm. The bars bent slightly and the frame tore from the window. Austin dropped the bars and frame down into some shrubbery, then tossed his suitcase after them; he eased himself from the window and stepped quickly down the fire escape.

Once on the cool grass surrounding the National Medical Center, Austin retrieved his suitcase and trotted quickly to the edge of the road. He ran down a short sidewalk, turned onto a busy main thoroughfare, and pulled open the door of a plain brown sedan.

Harry Donner pulled the car into the traffic and drove off. He was looking nervous, almost panicky. He reached into an inside pocket and removed an airlines envelope,

which he handed to Austin.

'You're ticketed straight through,' he said. 'You'll land in Nassau. Instructions about how to get a boat to take you to the island are included with how to find the beach house. The keys are there, too.'

'Well done, old friend,' Austin said. 'I don't think you know how much I need this.'

'I hope it doesn't back up on us.'

'You'll be in Japan before they even know I'm missing.'

'It's you I'm worried about,' Donner said, checking the rear-view mirror anxiously. 'You seem to be swimming upstream. Something in the program bothering you?'

Austin shrugged. 'There's always something,' he said. 'Even in the days of my Apollo training, there were times when I had to get off by myself.'

The drive to the airport went surprisingly well. Donner pulled the car to the front of the departure building.

'You'll love Paradise Cay,' Donner said. 'You want to be alone, and that's the place. There's nothing there, other than a few houses and a cemetery.'

'A cemetery?'

'The Bahamians didn't want to interrupt the pleasant dreams of their tourists by forcing them to look at headstones on the way to the golf course. So they built a cemetery on this rock fifty miles from nowhere. There's just a few beach houses there, and they're mostly unoccupied. You'll probably be the only one on the island.'

'Perfect.'

'There's one other thing, Steve. I want to tell you about an awful sweet little lady you may run into ... No obligation, but if you should want to spend some time with her ...'

'Thanks, Harry, but I owe this week to another lady.'

'Is she going to meet you down there?'

'No ... she couldn't make it ... but I'm going to think about her.'

Donner nodded as though he understood. 'To each his own,' he said. 'Have a great time.'

Austin climbed from the car, hoisted his suitcase, nodded, and walked into the terminal. When Austin was out of sight inside the building, Donner's smile changed to a sober stare. He lifted a panel on the seat divider and picked up a telephone. He balanced the phone on his shoulder and punched a number. 'Steve's on his way,' Donner said quietly.

'Good work, Harry,' Oscar Goldman replied.

The night flight was nearly empty. Especially in the first class section, where perhaps three fourths of the seats were unoccupied. Austin leaned back in the reclining seat, sipping his second glass of champagne – not a bad champagne, he thought, for a New York winery. The nearly empty plane gave Austin an eerie feeling. It was a Boeing 707, precisely the same plane he and Marty Schiller had stolen from a maintenance hangar at Kennedy Airport some time back when they were on the trail of a highly organized group of international arms dealers. The theft was planned to give those men the impression that Austin and Schiller had turned renegade, bringing with them knowledge and abilities that would prove invaluable to the ring, which had already killed many thousands and nearly upset the balance of power among emerging nations in Africa by detonating a nuclear weapon underneath a conference of ministers in the city of Butukama.

It was one of Austin's first missions. It was successful, but in the course of it, Marty Schiller died. Austin thought about that as the Boeing flew swiftly toward the Caribbean. So often when Austin went out, someone died, and often it was someone Austin liked. Of course, they were accidents, and of course they were all in the line of duty, but as a result Austin was growing weary. And there were other things. Before he stepped into the cockpit of the M3F5, he had said goodbye to a woman. He never saw her again. Before he dived from the balcony of the Alexandria hotel, he had said goodbye to a

woman. She was dead. Austin was beginning to develop a fear of having things taken away from him: people, life, and limbs. Perhaps the only way to survive, he thought, was to do as Wells had suggested: stop being so personally involved with his work. In short, to become something of a machine. A machine indeed. The thought made him smile, no matter how much he did not want to do so.

'More champagne, sir?'

The voice startled him. He looked up, still half in the grip of his daydream.

'The stewardess is offering you more champagne, Colonel Austin.'

The second voice brought him to attention. He looked for the first time at the woman seated next to him. She was beautiful, with long curly hair of a dark blond color, and thick lips. He thought for a moment she was French, but realized she could hardly be that. Her English was too perfect. He smiled at her to acknowledge what she had said, then extended his glass to the stewardess, who filled it.

'More champagne, miss?'

'No, thank you,' the woman said.

Austin looked at her at first with curiosity, then with growing suspicion. She knew his name. All of a sudden, he had an idea what had happened.

'You're a friend of Harry's, aren't you?' he said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You're the woman Harry Donner told me about.'

'Who?'

'Look,' Austin said, 'let's not play games. This plane is only a quarter full. There isn't another person in this aisle for ten seats in either direction. Yet I'm seated next to you. The airlines just don't do that sort of thing unless there's been a specific request. Also, you knew my name. Did Harry arrange this?'

'Let me understand,' the woman said. 'Do you think you're going to play with me for pay?'

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't have to,' the woman said, reaching over and slapping Austin's cheek. The cheek stung, and Austin glared at her as the champagne glass in his hand suddenly shattered. The woman looked at the pieces of glass and the stain down Austin's shirt, then stood up, excused herself, and walked by him.

'I think under the circumstances I had better sit elsewhere,' she said.

Across the aisle, Austin heard a guffaw. A rather portly businessman was smiling at him.

'Can't win 'em all, eh, Colonel?'

Brushing glass from his lap, Austin stood up.

'Everybody seems to know me tonight.'

'I recognized you from television. Me and the whole family watched you walk on the moon. It was very exciting. Where'll you think of going next?'

'Probably to hell in a handbasket,' Austin said. 'But for the moment, I'll settle for making it to the men's room.' He walked down the aisle.

'No foolin',' the man said, staring after him.

On his way back to his sea, Austin stopped by the galley and talked a stewardess out of a half-bottle of champagne. He sat near the window this time and was careful to hold his glass in his right hand. So she knew him. 'Damn,' he thought, 'I am getting so deeply into this OSO business I forgot I *am* something of a celebrity.'

The man at the charter boat agency handed the keys to the twenty-three-foot speedboat to Austin and gave him the compass heading for Paradise Cay. Austin took the time to buy fishing gear, an extra can of gas, a quantity of provisions, and then packed it all into the boat for the two hour journey. As Austin pulled away from the small charter dock, his attention was captured by the sight of an official limousine pulling onto the adjacent dock. Austin watched as the woman who had been seated next to him on the plane stepped from the rear of the limous-

ine and was ushered with official stiffness into a large and rather stately sport fisherman. The woman clearly was a dignitary of some kind. On the front and back of the limousine waved the familiar red flags of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. 'My judgment has been getting faulty of late,' Austin thought. Not want to be seen by her, he slipped the boat into the channel leading from Nassau harbor to the open sea, and as soon as he was away from all other boats, gunned the engine.

The sun was less than an hour above the horizon. Long, slow swells of crystal blue water rolled across the sea as Austin cranked the 225 hp Chrysler up to its full capacity and came to the correct compass heading. Steering with one hand, he opened a National Ocean Survey chart with the other. Paradise Cay was, as Donner had said, fifty miles from nowhere, on a line between Bimini and Great Abaco. Paradise Cay sat near the line where the Great Bahama Bank slipped down to the greater depths of Northwest Providence Channel. Austin knew that the large fish that inhabit deep waters would be coming onto the edge of the bank to feed. It was his intention to be waiting for them.

Two miles off the shore of Paradise Cay, Austin slowed to look at the island. Donner was quite correct. It was paradise; a little lonely, but that was what Austin wanted. The silver beach seemed endless, winding along for stretches of straight beach that went for miles, then dipping through a series of small coves and natural harbors ringed by tall trees and lush green shrubbery. A mile offshore, a huge flock of gulls swirled and circled off a spot where fish were feeding, picking up the leftovers that are inevitable when big fish encounter small ones. Austin smiled and checked his charts and Donner's notes. He had no trouble picking out the beach house, a modern A-frame situated on one of the small coves. The charts and the absence of long, rolling breakers told him there was plenty of water inshore. Austin pulled the boat into the cove, secured it alongside a small dock, and

killed the engine. The sun cast long spikes of light through the heavy vegetation. It was mid morning. Austin stripped off his shirt and walked up the dock.

A short path led through a forest of ferns and palmettos to a modern chalet. It was a typical redwood A-frame, with a two-storey front wall made entirely of glass overlooking a sun deck. Austin bounded up the stairs, across the deck, and unlocked the door. There was a large living area lit by the huge wall of glass. Behind it, a bar separated the living room and a large kitchen. Near the bar, an open stairway led up to a mezzanine sleeping area. The bath and utility rooms were in the back of the building, adjacent to the kitchen. Austin found the bar well-stocked, the refrigerator packed with Bass ale, the freezer crammed with steaks. Curious, Austin thought, Harry remembered that one night when Steve had a jag on for Bass ale. He pulled out a bottle and snapped it open. Before the bottle was drained, he had brought his clothes and equipment from the boat and changed into a bathing suit.

He swam for an hour, using the increased capacity for holding his breath given him by the fact that his heart no longer had to supply oxygen rich blood to a good part of his body, to explore the teeming marine life along the sandy bottom. He had a good time trying to swim down a bonito, but failed, only because the snap open swim fins weren't attached. Then he swam a leisurely crawl a mile or so down the shore and followed this with a brisk jog three miles in either direction of his house, during which time he encountered no other persons and only one other house, an older home in Spanish stucco surrounded by a high stone wall. This was his nearest neighbor, a few hundred yards along the beach, but it appeared unoccupied. After his run, Austin lay on the beach for a while amusing himself by trying to find the spot where the plastiskin of his left arm joined the real skin of his shoulder. He succeeded only by cheating; by touching various places and noticing the minute difference in sen-

sation between his human nerve endings and his biotic sensors.

At the end of his sunbath, Austin plunged into the water and after fifteen minutes' work, returned to the beach with two handfuls of clams. He was in the kitchen steaming them when the phone rang.

'Steve ... it's Harry. I'm calling from the airport. Just wanted to make sure you found it.'

'I found it,' Austin said. 'Look, Harry, I can hardly hear you.' Behind Donner, Austin could hear the sounds of a busy airport, and the connection itself was none too good.

'Is it everything I promised?'

'Everything.'

'Well, make the best of it. I don't mind telling you I wish it was me instead of you. But that's the way it goes. I've got to go now. They're calling my plane. Enjoy yourself, Steve.'

'I will,' Austin said, 'and thanks.'

Austin hung up and went back to his own very special recipe for clams arreganato and charcoal broiled steak. Donner replaced his receiver on its hook, pressed a button on a portable tape recorder and, the sound of Washington Airport silenced, left the phone booth and walked down a hall past a sign reading 'Restricted Area.'

Austin ate his lunch on the sun deck, then reclined on a lounge chair for a nap. Two hours later he awoke, showered, put on a fresh pair of pants, and walked onto the beach. He saw it immediately. Anchored a half-mile offshore, near the neighboring cottage, was a large sports-fishing boat. It was the same sports fisher Austin had seen the Russian woman step aboard back at Nassau. Odd coincidence, he thought. Austin walked quickly down the beach and followed the stone wall to a gate leading from the beach. It was locked. He continued around the wall until he reached the two-lane asphalt road which ran by both houses. A driveway led down from the road to another gate. Austin walked to the gate and pushed it open.

The gate swung wide, and Austin found himself staring into the barrel of a Russian made automatic rifle.

'I beg your pardon,' Austin said, trying to appear lighthearted about it. The guard said nothing.

'Look,' Austin said, 'the lady who arrived in that boat ... is she inside?'

The guard stared blankly, without lowering his weapon.

'I think maybe I owe her an apology ...' He started to walk past the guard, but the man pushed the rifle into Austin's stomach.

'... since we're apparenty going to be neighbors.'

'This is private property,' the guard said in Russian. 'There is no trespassing.' It took Austin a second to understand the sentence, as it had been a while since he had last had to speak Russian.

'Go home,' the guard said, in English.

Austin shrugged. 'Seems like a good idea,' he said. Austin smiled, waved politely, and departed. He retraced his footsteps back to the beach, gave a few seconds' thought to hopping over the fence and going to the back door, then said the hell with it and strolled off idly down the beach, pausing now and then to skim a stone across the water.

It was more than an hour before he returned to the cottage. The sun was low in the western sky, preparing to set beneath some low cumulus clouds. Austin took his last look of the day at the ocean and turned up the path. He stopped.

The light was on in the living room, and the draperies were closed. Instinctively, Austin dropped to a crouch. As he did so, he saw a movement in the draperies. Quickly he slipped off the path and into the thick covering of palmettos. He moved swiftly through the bushes to the side of the chalet, worked his way to the back of the cottage, and entered through the little used door nearest the street.

Down the short hallway, he could see a woman in her mid twenties arranging herself on the couch, facing the deck door through which she obviously expected him to enter at any moment. She had wild, reddish brown hair and was wearing a red halter top over low-cut blue jeans and was, Austin noticed immediately, suitably top heavy. He watched as she patted her hair into place and moistened her lips. He walked silently into the room, just out of her vision.

'You look perfect,' he said.

The girl gave a little yell and leaped to her feet. Suddenly, despite her careful preparations, she was completely disheveled.

'Don't ever do that to a person,' she said. 'You could have given me a heart attack.'

Austin walked past her and moved behind the bar.

'Let me guess . . . You're a friend of Harry's.'

'If you're going to say it like that,' she said with a pout that was obviously phony, 'I guess I'll leave.'

'That's probably a good idea,' Austin said. 'But I think you could use a drink first.'

'That's a kind of a left handed invitation,' she said, patting her hair back into place.

'You made a left-handed entrance. What'll you have?'

'Vodka tonic. The lime wedges are in the refrigerator.'

'Are they really?' Austin said caustically.

'Like you said . . . I'm a friend of Harry's.'

'I thought he'd just rented this place.'

'Well . . . he's rented it before.'

Austin handed her the vodka and tonic and took a sip of a strange looking potion.

'What's that?' she asked.

'A moonshot.'

'A which?'

'A little number from the Cape. Guaranteed to keep you in a smooth orbit. Tell me about the house next door.' He sat on the couch, and she joined him.

'Empty, as far as I know.'

'Nope . . . a lady who came in on the plane with me is staying there.'

'Pretty?'

'Yes, but that's not why I asked.'

'Well, the Russians use it now and then. I don't know who owns it.'

'The Russians use it? For what?'

'For a retreat. For a vacation house for their embassy personnel in Washington. Even *they* like to sit in the sand now and then. I realize Paradise Cay isn't nearly as nice as . . . what's the name of that Russian resort?'

'It's on the Black sea. I don't recall the name of it, either. Neither do most Russians, I imagine.'

'Well, it's not so unusual for the Russians to have a place down here. Lots of embassies do. This place, in fact.'

'What?'

'Don't you know Tony Doyle? The man who owns it?'

'Uh . . . no.'

'State Department. I don't know what he *does*. Maybe he empties the ashtrays. I only know he's State Depart ment. Lots of them come down here.'

'Just for a vacation, of course.'

'I suppose so.'

'And if the Russians happen to be vacationing here at the same time, and if the U.S. has something private to discuss with the Russians . . .'

'I wouldn't know about that,' she said. 'I'm just a friend of Harry's.'

Austin replenished their drinks.

'What did Harry tell you about me?' he asked.

'He said you might be a little . . .'

'Different?'

'Standoffish. He just said to fill you in on what's going on . . . You know, line up some fishing . . . set you up with the pro at the golf club.'

'What golf club?'

'At Nassau. I can fly you there.'

'*Fly* me there?'

'People *do* fly.'

'I've heard that.'

'I have a helicopter,' she said proudly.

'You . . . have . . . a . . . helicopter,' Austin said, quite in disbelief.

'Well, a girl has to have a job, and that's mine. I fly people from island to island. I'm very busy.'

'I have no doubt of that,' Austin said.

'Harry also told me to stay out of your way.'

'That's good advice.'

'Mind if I ask you a question?'

'Shoot.'

'What's the matter with you?'

Austin shrugged and managed an ironic smile.

'Doctors say I'm not all here.'

'*Really*? You look fine to me. What's missing?'

'Nothing that should prove to be any problem in our relationship . . . You mentioned a golf course?'

'Whenever you're ready.'

'Tomorrow, in the afternoon. In the morning, I have a date with a barracuda.'

'Anyone I know?'

'Perhaps. You can come, if you like. But I warn you . . . I'm leaving at sunrise.'

'I'll be on time. If not,' she said, twirling an index finger in the air to mimic the rotor of a helicopter, 'I shall find you.' She thought for a second, then added, 'In fact, I really don't have to rush off . . .'

'Yes, you do,' Austin said firmly, determined to spend at least one night of his hermit life alone.

'Well,' she said, draining her glass and handing it to him, 'good night.' She opened the door and stepped onto the deck.

'Hey,' Austin called. 'Your name?'

'Cynthia Holland,' she yelled over her shoulder as she strode down the path. 'My friends call me Cyn . . . no wisecracks.'

'Fascinating,' Austin said, to no one in particular, as he

closed the door. He fixed himself another drink and sat down at the telephone. He dialed a number in Washington and caught Rudy Wells between the shower and the 11 o'clock news.

'Rudy? It's me, Steve.'

'Steve, where are you?'

'Getting a little R and R.'

'They're going crazy around here. You had us worried.'

'That's why I called ... to let you know I'm all right. Matter of fact, I've never been better ... except there is one thing.'

'What is it?'

'You remember I had that glass shatter on me in the hospital? It happened again.'

'Steve, I ran that through a simulated laboratory condition, and I think I've got it licked. Were you by any chance upset or angry when it happened?'

'Matter of fact, I was.'

'Then that's it. You're experiencing a power surge in your hand induced by the sudden adrenalin increase in your system when you're angry. It's a minor adjustment. If you'll just come in...'

Austin smiled. 'It will have to wait a few days, Doc. But don't worry. I'm not anyplace where I'm liable to be getting angry. Be seeing you.'

Austin left the cottage to check the lines on the boat and say good night to the sea. He had only been on Paradise Cay eight hours, and already he felt a universe better. A few hundred yards away, a light was burning in the neighboring house. Austin stared at it for a second, then hoisted his glass in the direction of the light.

'Enjoy your vacation,' he mumbled, then strolled back to his house to arrange for a bite to eat and bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun broke above the horizon at precisely 5:21. At precisely 5:22 a sleek blue and-white Bell Ranger helicopter fitted with pontoons swooped down out of the southern sky, circled the chalet, and set down on the beach. The rotors slowed to a halt, a door opened, and Cynthia Holland jumped onto the beach and ran up to Steve Austin.

'How do you like it?' she asked.

'Very pretty. Surplus police?'

'No!' she said, indignantly. 'It's new. I bought it.'

'You are a lady of independent means?'

'I'd like to be. Actually, I got a mortgage. It'll be mine in ten years.' She indicated a bright white sign reading 'Bahamas Air Ferry, Inc.'

'Very enterprising. What's that?' Austin pointed to the two-quart Thermos she was holding.

'Bloody Marys. I thought you might need them. The mood you were in last night, I figured you would put away a few.'

'Can't drink too much,' Austin said. 'Eats away at the fixtures and fittings, you know.'

'Oh, well,' she said. walking with him to the dock. 'I could use them.'

'Have a big night after you left me?'

'Nope. But did you ever have to deal with a turbine chopper at five in the morning?'

'Something like that. Noisy, eh?'

'Awful, instant hangover. I don't know how I do it.'

'How'd you learn to fly that thing?'

'I took lessons. How else?'

'How, indeed.'

'Care for a lesson yourself?'

'No way. I came here to get away from machines.'

They cast off bow and stern lines and Austin maneuvered the craft into the cool, blue sea. When the boat was safely offshore, Austin gunned the engine. With the Chrysler running at full cruising speed, the boat planed easily at twenty-five or so knots. Austin skipped past the stern of the Russian's huge sport fisher, making sure his wake did not go unnoticed by anyone who might be aboard, then took the speedboat on a course which would take them around the eastern tip of Paradise Cay and North into Northwest Providence Channel.

With Cynthia at the wheel, Austin rigged two poles and trolled at three knots for two hours, yielding an assortment of mackerel, bonito and, finally, a beautiful thirty seven pound sailfish which Austin admired for a few seconds, then released. It was noon, and the sun was at the top of the sky. Austin packed away the gear, shut down the engine, and disappeared into the small forward cabin. He appeared in a second with his own Thermos.

'What's that?' the woman asked.

'Moonshots. Have one?'

'Yes. It's hot.'

'I thought I might cook us a steak.'

'You have a steak to cook?'

'And charcoal. And a hibachi. I even have some Italian bread. None too fresh, I admit, but this ain't the *Queen Elizabeth*.'

'Who cares?' she said fluffing her hair and stretching her arms into the light breeze.

'How about a swim first?'

'Can't,' Austin said. 'There's some nasty creatures down there called sharks. Besides,' he said, 'you have no suit.'

The girl shrugged, and Austin smiled.

'I'll fix the food,' he said.

Through the lunch they drifted, listened to the wind and the waves, and watched the lazy flight of the gulls that hung around the boat, hoping for a handout. Finally, Austin stood up, stretched, and stripped off his shirt. He raised one eyebrow mysteriously and disappeared into the cabin.

'Where are you going?' Cynthia called. There was no answer.

'Hey!'

She got up from where they had been stretched out on the deck and stepped down to the door of the cabin.

Austin was leaning in the door, sipping a drink. He set the glass down, reached up, and grabbed the front of her blouse. 'Well, what shall we do now?' he said, pulling her into the cabin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Lake Killarney Country Club was a new course situated on a series of lovely lakes a few miles from the city of Nassau on New Providence Island. The clubhouse was a sprawling series of buildings – some modern with high glass facades, others, also new, done to resemble centuries old Caribbean villas. It was four in the afternoon when Austin, accompanied by Cynthia Holland and a young caddy, stepped out onto the lush green grass of the driving range.

'A few practice shots first,' Austin said. 'I haven't gotten to play that much in the way of golf lately, and I never was very good at it. You first.'

The caddy set Cynthia up at the tee. As he was doing so, Austin suddenly was distracted by a cluster of people moving by the clubhouse. One was the Russian woman Austin had encountered on the plane. Another was a stern-looking, polished man whom Austin did not recognize. It was the third who made Austin break into a broad grin.

'Alexei!' Austin yelled.

The yell came in the middle of Cynthia's first swing. She topped the ball, sending it skipping down to one side.

'Swell!' she said. 'Your fairway ethics leave something

to be desired.' But Austin didn't hear her. He was jogging over to the group.

'Alexei ... I didn't realize they paid you Russians enough for this kind of life! What in the world are you doing here?'

Austin thrust out his hand, and Alexei took it, slowly and unsmiling. He appeared distressed to see his old friend.

'An American shortcoming,' the Russian said, struggling for words. 'You believe your own propaganda.' Reluctantly, he introduced his companions. 'Mr Arlen Findletter, Miss Katrina Volana. This is...'

'Colonel Austin, the American Astronaut,' Katrina said. 'We've met.'

Findletter's normally stoic face suddenly took on an air of curiosity. 'You're all friends?' he asked.

'Our government,' Alexei Koslov said quickly, 'invited the crew of Apollo 17 to Moscow. As a rocket expert I was one of the hosts.'

'We met on the airplane,' Katrina explained. 'Colonel Austin and I were seated together ... for a while.'

'What a remarkable coincidence,' Findletter said dryly.

'Listen, I don't know how long you're going to be here,' Austin said, 'but we've got to get together. Are you staying on Paradise Cay? I've got a place right down the beach. Alexei, this morning I caught the most beautiful sailfish God ever put into the sea!'

Koslov looked embarrassed. 'I'm afraid our schedule is rather full ... but it was good to see you again ... Colonel ... Goodbye.' With this, the Russian took Katrina in tow and began to walk off. Findletter, who lingered a moment after the others, eyed Austin with a great deal of interest.

'At the risk of a dreadful cliché,' he said, 'I have a feeling we've met before, Colonel.'

Austin continued staring after Koslov, unable to believe the rebuff.

'It's possible,' he said, 'but I'm afraid I don't remem

ber. No offense.'

'Perhaps it will come to me. Well, enjoy your stay. I hope it proves to be profitable.' Findletter turned and walked after the others.

Austin strode angrily back to the tee.

'May I remind you it's rude to leave one lady to converse with another?' Cynthia said. 'Not to mention interrupting her backswing.'

Austin placed a ball on the tee.

'I saw an old friend,' he said bitterly.

"If you don't mind my saying it, if that's the way your close friends treat you, you ought to consider a personality course.'

Austin was seething. 'I guess maybe I should, at that,' he said. Austin swung viciously at the ball, a powerful stroke in which he purged himself of all anger and frustration.

The ball took off from the tee and began to climb in what appeared to be a straight line, whistling like a round from a 105 mm howitzer. Cynthia and the caddy watched the ball with wide eyes as it disappeared into the distance. Austin, disgusted with himself at having made this tactical blunder, walked off the tee. At the entrance to the clubhouse, Austin could see Findletter and the two Russians also watching the ball.

'Well?' Cynthia said.

'Well, what?'

'How did you do that?'

Austin gave her a considered look and, with a gesture of modesty said, 'It's all in the wrists.'

The sun was setting as Austin and the girl returned to the beach cottage.

'I hope you won't take offense,' she said, picking up an envelope that had been shoved under the door, 'but there's something peculiar about you. This is addressed to you.'

Austin opened the envelope and read the note.

'None of my business?'

'You've been invited to dinner.'

'Me? You mean us?'

'Yes, I mean us. Get me a drink, would you?'

'One of those moonbeams?'

'Shots . . . moonshots. They're in the blender.'

'Right . . . whatever. May I guess who invited us was it your friend the Russian?'

'As a matter of fact it was the man with him, Mr Find letter. Ever hear of him?'

'No. Should I have?'

'I don't know.'

'That makes two of us. Look, may I say something?'

'Shoot.'

'I thought for a while that you didn't like girls.'

'Actually, I like them very much. I think they're great fun. I wanted to take one to the moon with me . . . there were some experiments I wanted to attempt in a zero gravity situation. But,' Austin shrugged, 'they wouldn't let me.'

'Now I just wonder why you won't open up to me. You seem worried about something.'

'I have been, and if I was ready to open up to anybody . . . I think it'd be you. But—'

'Meaning . . .'

'I read someplace that you shouldn't be in too much of a hurry to be rid of a hurt. It's good for people to feel. It's what separates us from . . . machines . . . and some institu tions.'

'That's so beautiful, I think I'm going to cry.'

'That's good for you, too. Take off your clothes.'

'What?'

'Get your bathing suit on. We're going for a swim. Then we've got a big night ahead of us.'

Austin was into his suit ahead of her and down to the beach in time to catch the last rays of the sun. Without waiting for her to appear, he swam straight out to sea a

hundred yards, turned over, and floated happily on his back.

Cynthia Holland waited until she saw him go into the water, then picked up the phone and dialed a number in Washington.

'They're meeting tonight,' she said.

'What do you mean tonight?' Harry Donner yelled. 'You were supposed to give me some warning!'

'Don't yell at me, Harry. I didn't invite us. Findletter did.'

'What about the Russians? You run into them yet?'

'They're invited, too.'

'Invited too. You mean Steve, Findletter, and the Rus sians are all going out tonight?'

'It all happened so fast I didn't know what to do. Harry, what *do* I do?'

'What do you think you do? You go with him, of course. Now, just stay cool and keep your eye on things. I'll get there as fast as I can.'

The girl replaced the receiver on its cradle, hurried into a bikini, and headed to the beach to join Austin. When she made the lip of the water, she was able to see him floating leisurely offshore, and once again had to admit she had qualms. He was a nice man. Intelligent, good-looking, and sensitive. God, did she know he was sensitive. Harry, Oscar, and now he himself made her very aware of that quality And one thing he was especi ally sensitive about was being manipulated. She had no idea *why* Austin was so touchy about being treated as a puppet. Oscar had been very elusive when questioned by Donner and Cynthia on that point. And now it was her job to go out and manipulate him, to use him without his knowledge. Damnable business, she thought, as she plunged into the water and began swimming out to meet him.

Steve Austin always felt that, if nothing else, the Baham-ians knew how to build casinos. They patterned them

after the great gambling halls of Europe, not after Las Vegas casinos, which always seemed as if they were designed to replicate a pimp's idea of heaven. It was close to eleven in the evening, and Austin, dressed in a newly rented tuxedo, was standing at a roulette table with Cynthia on his arm. Austin watched as the wheel spun and a ball dropped into a pocket.

'Treize noir,' the croupier said, pushing a pile of chips toward the American.

'Is there anything you aren't good at?' Cynthia asked.

'I've never had much success milking reindeer.'

'Mr Austin . . .'

The voice belonged to Katrina Volana, who looked particularly lovely in a long, dark-blue gown.

'Miss Volana.'

'Alexei would like to see you.'

'I assumed he'd be joining us later with Mr Findletter.'

'He'd like to see you alone first.'

Austin thought about this for a moment, then turned and patted Cynthia on the shoulder.

'Sit in for me,' he said.

'Why can't I go with you?' she asked, concerned.

'Because . . . my system is based on one thousand continuous plays at the wheel. I worked it out on the NASA computer. We quit now, it'll cost us a fortune.'

Austin took Katrina's arm and walked off. Cynthia Holland was far from happy, but was distracted by the croupier.

'Faites vos jeux, mesdames et messieurs.' The gallery squealed as he pushed another pile of winnings toward Cynthia. Suddenly the center of attention, and in any case powerless to go barging after Austin, she returned her attention to the table.

Austin let the Russian girl lead him from the casino, through a series of gardens on the grounds of the hotel complex in which the casino was located, to a small bungalow used for private meetings. At her knock, a security guard opened the door and eyed Austin warily.

'It's all right,' the woman said.

The guard admitted them, then stepped outside and closed the door after him. Koslov was standing in the middle of a plush meeting room containing several leather chairs and a large mahogany desk. He was holding two drinks, one of which he extended toward Austin.

'Two parts vodka for a colossal liftoff,' he said smiling. 'One part brandy for a magnificent orbit. And a blend of triple sec and grenadine to bring you safely back to earth. To your good health, my friend.'

Austin and Koslov drank their glasses dry in one shot, then hurled them crashing into the fireplace. They embraced, but when the embrace was over, somber expressions followed.

'If you gentlemen will excuse me now,' the woman said, leaving the room.

'My friend,' Koslov said, 'I would like nothing better than to talk of the times we spent together in Moscow ... the rules we broke, the women we knew ... the vodka we inhaled. But there isn't time.'

Koslov turned his back on Austin, walking to the other end of the room. He was a handsome man of about forty, tanned but with the Russian tendency toward shortness.

'I wasn't happy to see you today,' he said quietly.

'That came through.'

'Any other time ... yes, but not here ... not now. I asked you to come for one reason. You can guess what it is.'

'I assumed it was to explain what happened this morning.'

'You *know* what happened, and why. I asked you here to suggest we work together.'

'Alexei,' Austin said, baffled, 'I came here for a vacation ... isn't that why you're here?'

'Steve, this is not a time for nationalistic games,' Koslov said angrily. 'Divided, we play directly into Findletter's hands. Together we can destroy him.'

'Alexei, you have to believe me when I say I don't know

what you're talking about. I am on vacation. I came here to get away. As a matter of fact, I went to elaborate lengths to get away, including busting out of a ... a NASA quarantine. I am here to fish.'

Koslov walked to the desk and opened the drawer. From it he took a file folder. He opened the folder and removed a piece of typing paper.

'Since our unexpected encounter this morning, I had your file checked. From the beginning of the year until now, you have been involved in no NASA activities of any substance. On eleven separate occasions, I can place you in the same building with Oscar Goldman, a man whose activities are quite familiar to us. One week ago you were in Alexandria the night Arlen Findletter's boat blew up. You left Alexandria that same night by means unknown. One day ago, you arrived here aboard a flight on which an office in Washington specifically requested a seat next to the Soviet Undersecretary for Special External Security. And again, once here, your lodgings are conveniently next door to a cottage used exclusively by members of the Soviet Mission.'

Koslov reinserted the paper in the folder and slapped it shut. He stared accusingly at Austin, who was no longer bewildered.

'Do you still insist you are nothing but an astronaut playboy on holiday?'

Austin was fuming, and he was ill able to hide it. He wanted only to get his hands on Goldman, Harry Donner, even Cynthia, who now was obviously a part of it. He turned from the Russian and made for the door.

'What I said was the truth. I came here for no other reason than what I've told you. Now, if you'll excuse me, Alexei, I'd better be going. Thanks for the drink.'

Austin yanked open the door, to find that the security guard was blocking any exit, holding a pistol on Austin. Austin could feel the blood pounding in his temples.

'I've had quite enough for one day,' he said, lifting his bionic arm in an uppercut which moved so rapidly the

guard couldn't think of using his pistol, or think of anything at all. Steve's fist caught the man under the jaw, smashing teeth and bones and lifting the man entirely off his feet. The guard hung suspended in mid air for a ridiculously long second, then crumpled to the ground. Austin wheeled and pointed at Koslov.

'I've *had it* with being pushed around,' he snapped. 'I see one more Russian point a gun at me and I swear I'll take the place apart.'

'I'm sorry, old friend,' Koslov said, lifting a gun from under the desk. 'I really am.' He pulled the trigger. Austin felt a pain in his chest and a spreading numbness. He took two steps toward Koslov, his arm extended toward the man, then fell forward into darkness.

Koslov walked to Austin and looked down at him. Then he handed the gun to Katrina Volana and walked quickly into the casino. Arlen Findletter was there, surrounded by an entourage of bodyguards and women.

'Our American friend has not arrived,' Findletter said.

'The Soviet government will meet your price subject to my inspection of the merchandise,' Koslov said. 'There will be no bidding. The American is not coming.'

Findletter smiled knowingly. 'I really didn't want to do business with the Americans,' he said, 'But I did think we could drive the price up a bit. At any rate, to the victor go the spoils. When would you like to have your inspection?'

'As soon as possible.'

'It is some distance,' Findletter said. 'I must have time to make suitable arrangements. Shall we say tomorrow night at this same time?'

'And where shall I meet you?'

'Here,' Findletter said. 'I shall meet you here.'

The Russian nodded and left.

The blue-and-white Bell Ranger hovered over the beach, its spotlight picking out the empty chalet.

'There is it is,' Harry Donner said.

Cynthia Holland put the craft down on the beach and doused the engines. The two of them ran up to the house, only to find it empty. It was two in the morning, and Donner was in a foul mood.

'He never came back,' she said.

'There's no place in our work for amateurs,' Donner said. 'I'm sure it seemed like a great idea having a hotshot ex astronaut on our team, but it's like I told Oscar. What could Steve Austin do that any one of us pros couldn't do better?'

'Harry, he was a sitting duck. He didn't have any idea what was going on.'

'No plan is perfect. This whole foul up is the Russians fault. They overreacted. Just goes to show you can't trust them.'

'What are we going to do about it?'

'What can we do about it, Cynthia? Face facts. Knowing the Russians, if they got their hands on Steve, he's fish bait by now.'

Donner paced the floor silently, then waved a hand at the bar. 'Make me a drink, would you?'

'Make your own goddam drink,' she said, fighting back tears. She threw open the door and walked down the path toward the beach.

CHAPTER NINE

Austin thought it was a nice boat, and finally he was sure of it. The cabin in which he lay was what yacht brokers call well appointed, with deep upholstery, a bar built into one wall, a bookcase, a television set, and other elements of life needed by those fishermen who really aren't terribly interested in fishing. The sweet smell of the sea was in the air, and he could hear the sound of gulls. Apparently the boat was dead in the water. No motor noise could be heard. He opened his eyes fully and sat up. Katrina Volana was standing before him, dressed in a rather eye-opening bikini.

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Rested. I should get shot more often.'

'Not shot, tranquilized. For your own good.'

'Where was that decided, Moscow?'

'It was Alexei's decision. If you really don't know what is going on, you could easily get caught in the middle and badly hurt. If you were telling him the truth about wanting a vacation, then you should accept the hospitality he is extending you. You have the best food. The best drink. The best fishing. You have the run of the ship.'

'I have the strangest feeling I've heard that before,' Austin said, mainly to himself.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing, nothing. Tell me one thing, do you come along with the package?'

'You made that mistake before.'

'That doesn't answer my question. How far did Alexei say to go to keep me here?'

'We'd better go up on deck,' she said.

Katrina led the way to the deck, with Austin right behind her, his eyes glued to her behind. The day was beautiful, but the Caribbean vista was spoiled by two guards with automatic weapons. They were standing on the flying bridge and raised their rifles when Austin came into view. He waved to them.

'No, no, fellas . . . fishing poles, not rifles.'

'They don't speak English,' she said.

'I suppose they're here to protect me from flying fish. What time is it, anyway?'

'It is . . . nearly five in the afternoon. You have been asleep since . . . midnight last night.'

'No wonder I feel rested.'

'The captain has orders to allow you to fish any of these waters, so long as you never come within twenty miles of any coast.'

'Sounds fair enough. Now then, I believe I'm entitled to one phone call.'

'You aren't taking this very seriously.'

'No, you are wrong. I am taking the situation very seriously. It is you I do not take seriously.'

'Colonel Austin . . .'

'Are you really the undersecretary for whatever it-is . . .'

'I am.'

'You are also a very beautiful woman.'

'Thank you.'

'And you will forgive me for regarding you primarily as a beautiful woman. Such an attitude is a frailty of American men. And, might I add, you do nothing to discourage that impression.' Austin indicated her bathing suit, which was flesh-colored and almost transparent.

Suddenly, she became the Undersecretary for Special

External Security and realized that she had allowed her exterior to become highly insecure.

'I shall change.'

'No, no. Absolutely not. I am here to enjoy myself, and part of that is looking at you.'

'Then you accept our terms? A relaxing excursion aboard the ship as the guest of the Soviet Union ... And you will not try to use the radio or cause trouble?'

'All right, I'm on vacation. If I change my mind, you have my word you'll be the first to know.'

Katrina brightened. 'Welcome aboard the *Pelican*,' she said. 'One moonshot coming up.' She moved off into the cabin to make the drink. When she was gone, Austin looked up toward the flying bridge, where the two armed guards were standing. He called to them.

'It's okay fellas. We're operating under a new deal ... the honor system.'

He took a step towards the stairs, but was met by two gun barrels.

'So much for the honor system,' Austin said. 'Nice move, guy ... really looked good.' He went into the cabin after the girl.

She had her back to the door, bending over the bar. Austin walked into the room and began unbuttoning his shirt.

'You know one thing?' he said. 'Remember on the plane when I accused you of having been sent to me by a man named Harry?'

'I remember,' she said, without turning around. Austin stripped off his shirt and sat on the bed to remove his shoes.

'Well, I didn't lie to you. There was a Harry, and he did set me up with a girl. I was right about that. I only thought it was the wrong girl.'

'Your apology is accepted,' she said, turning to bring him the drink and seeing him shirtless.

'What are you doing?'

'Taking my clothes off. What does it look like?'

'Must we go through that again?'

'I merely want to put on a bathing suit. Now, if you don't want to be embarrassed further, I suggest you go and get me one. After that, I would like a nautical chart of this area.'

'What do you want that for?' she asked suspiciously.

'You said I can go fishing anywhere I want to, as long as it isn't within twenty miles of land. Well, I can't tell you where I want to go unless I know where I am. Get me a chart, have the captain indicate our present position on it, and I'll tell you where I want to fish.'

'Sounds reasonable,' she said, handing him the drink.

She went off, returning in a few minutes.

'Are you decent?' she called.

'No.'

She stuck her arm inside the door and tossed the suit to him. He put it on and walked to the bar.

'You can come in now,' he said.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside.

'Here is your chart,' she said, spreading it out on the bed.

'You make an awful moonshot,' Austin said, handing her an empty glass. 'Could you have a go at a vodka and tonic?'

'Colonel Austin, you are full of insults today. Go look at your chart.' She took the glass from him, and he went to kneel by the bed. He studied the chart. Damn, he thought, they were on the north side of Paradise Cay, about thirty miles from shore. A long way from home. He found a pencil and circled a spot on the south side of the island, about twenty-five miles from shore.

'Here,' he showed her. 'This spot has absolutely the best shark fishing in the entire world. I would like to go after sharks. I only like to kill things that ... deserve to be killed.'

'I shall tell the captain,' she said. She took the chart and walked off. Within a few minutes, the engines started up, and Austin could feel the boat moving.

Austin figured an hour for the boat to travel the distance from the north to the south side of the Cay. During that time, he kept Katrina amused with small-talk, space stories, and errands (such as getting one of the guards to set up a very elaborate array of night-fishing tackle). They ate a horrid meal which had been flash-frozen and then baked in a microwave oven. And they consumed a goodly amount of vodka.

An hour later, they were lying on the bed, the girl with her head on Austin's shoulder. Austin had shelved his drink and was playing with a strand of her hair.

'Are you sure you wouldn't rather be fishing?' she asked.

'I'm all fished out.'

'But you haven't even been up on deck.'

'Katrina ... I think we should spend these last few minutes together.'

'What last few minutes?'

'The ones we're going to have while I'm tying you up.'

'What are you talking about?' she asked raising herself onto one elbow. 'You gave me your word ...'

'That you'd be the first to know when I came off holiday. The time's come. It'll be dark soon, and there are things going on I've got to find out about.'

The boat slowed to a crawl, a sure indication they had reached the spot Austin had requested. While he was distracted by the change in the sound of the motors, Katrina tried to bolt away, but he grabbed her and pushed her back down beside him.

'Let's keep this thing civilized,' he said. 'I didn't make a big fuss over your kidnapping me. Now I expect a little reason from you.'

Austin kissed the girl gently on the lips, then lifted her into a chair and tied her, using strips of sheet. Satisfied that she would remain confined at least long enough for him to make his move, he leaned over and stroked her hair.

'I want you to know I appreciate everything you did to

make my stay enjoyable.'

Austin lowered the gag he had fastened around her lips and kissed her. After a brief and futile resistance, she submitted.

'Why must you do this?' she asked. 'The guards'll kill you. They have their orders, and they won't know any other way to stop you.'

'I'll be fine,' he said.

'But it's miles and miles to shore. Twenty five miles. I can't let you do it . . .' She began to scream, but he quickly replaced the gag.

Austin moved to the cabin wall and opened the porthole. He gripped it solidly with his left arm, and pulled on it. It snapped out, leaving a large, round hole in its wake. The girl's eyes flared with disbelief.

Austin dropped the porthole and gripped the beam next to it. He pulled. With an agonizing groan, the wood gave, and a four-foot section ripped out in his hand. Katrina was stunned, unable to make a noise, her eyes glued to the man-sized hole Austin had made in the side of the yacht.

'Sorry I had to violate your porthole,' he said, then turned and dived through the hole into the sea just as a guard, attracted by the sound of ripping wood, burst into the cabin and unleashed a stream of bullets after the fleeing figure.

Austin dived straight for the bottom. At about fifteen feet, he stopped, reached down to his right thigh, found the plastiskin seal, and removed the mask and breathing apparatus. How perfectly clear it was now. The mask and breathing apparatus were not standard equipment. He only carried them when on assignments in the course of which he was likely to be submerged. Yet after the Egyptian business, Rudy had not only left the stuff in, he had replenished the oxygen supply. It was a set up all along. He had refused to go on a mission until they properly explained the death of Tamara, so they had tricked him into going on one. Well, there was lots of time to get

even. There was lots of time to get even with a number of people. At the moment, the most immediate person was Alexei Koslov. Austin had made a promise to him about what would happen the next time a Russian pointed a gun in his direction. The mask and breathing apparatus in place, he affixed the snap-open fins to his feet and allowed himself to float slowly to the surface.

Fifty yards away, the sports fisher was in panic. The two guards were running from side to side, while search lights sought out the form of a desperately swimming man. On the stern, Austin could see the figure of a girl looking anxiously into the night. At least, he thought, she will not drown. I can be assured of that. He dived to a depth of thirty feet and, swimming swiftly, came to a point underneath the boat in a few seconds. The yacht was dead in the water above him. Austin picked a spot just to one side of the keel at about amidships. Kicks with all his might, he drove upwards toward the underside of the hull. He was moving at about twenty knots when his left arm flashed out, curled into a fist, crashing a hole through the hull, immediately flooding the bilge with sea water. He grasped a lateral beam and, bracing his feet against the keel, yanked downward. A large section of the bottom tore out. Austin gazed at his handiwork for a time, then swam off. Never was there a bilge pump which could handle that flood, Austin thought. Let them use the lifeboat. Let them row ashore.

A hundred yards away, Austin surfaced. Behind him, panic still reigned on the boat. Already it was beginning to settle. The two guards were on the foredeck, unleashing the lifeboat. He could not see what the girl was doing, but felt sure she was safe, although due to be kept occupied and incommunicado for six hours at least. Austin pushed the mask up on his forehead and checked the stars. In a few seconds, he had traced the familiar reference points. If I can find the moon, he thought, I sure as hell can find a lousy island. Replacing the mask, he began to swim.

CHAPTER TEN

At the beach chalet, it was nearly eight in the evening. An acceptable but uneasy truce prevailed between the two occupants of the house and their superiors in Washington.

'We'll try to make our move tonight,' Harry Donner said.

'How?' Cynthia asked. 'The whole idea was to have a diversion. They'd be so busy watching Steve, even you could get in to snatch Findletter's catalogue.'

'Even me!' Donner yelled. 'What kind of a crack is that? Where did you get the idea I need a diversion?'

'From Oscar,' she said dryly, 'at the briefing.'

'Yeah ... well, we'll see. This won't be the first time I've had to run for a touchdown off a broken play.'

The phone rang, and both stared at it. Finally, Donner hoisted the instrument to his ear. It was Oscar Goldman, as expected by both of them, but desired by neither.

'Yes, sir,' Donner said. 'We're going to try to get that catalogue out of Findletter's safe tonight – apparently he's going someplace.'

'How did Steve take the news that he was on an operation after all?' Goldman asked.

'Oh, fine, sir ... I handled that very well, if I do say so.'

'Good, I thought with a few days' rest he might be ready to listen to reason.'

'Don't you worry about me handling Steve Austin . . . I got him here in the first place, didn't I?'

'Steve!' Cynthia Holland yelled.

At that moment, the door opened and Austin, haggard from his long swim and subsequent jog along some ten miles of beach, stepped into the room. Austin looked at Cynthia expressionlessly, but when he saw Donner standing neat and trim in a pressed suit, his hair neatly in place, a telephone in his hand, the adrenalin began to flow. Austin charged across the room toward the man.

'Steve . . .' Donner said, backing up.

Austin hit Donner with a solid right, knocking the man over backwards, tumbling a coffee table with him.

'What's going on there?' Oscar Goldman asked.

'Austin picked up the phone. 'That you, Oscar?'

'Steve boy . . . how's the rest coming?'

'Listen, pal,' Austin said menacingly, 'the next time you want me on a mission, you lay it all out up front, or I'll kick your department so high you'll need Skylab to get it down. Now get this clown out of here before I kill him!'

Austin held the phone away from his ear and squeezed his hand. A trickle of black powder oozed from his fingers. Then he smashed the phone down on the cradle, turning the entire instrument into a flattened pancake of wires, nuts, bolts, and shattered plastic. In Washington, Oscar Goldman recoiled from the phone as a high pitched shriek came through the wires. He dropped the receiver onto the cradle, thought for a moment, then mused, 'Something's wrong down there.'

'Perhaps,' Rudy Wells said, drawing on his pipe and unleashing a thick cloud of smoke into the room, 'something's wrong up here.'

'You think I've mishandled this situation?'

'Oscar, I have no right to an opinion on what you call "the situation." Field operations are way out of my line.

But I do care about Steve Austin. I care what happens to him as a man. And I think I know what he can do for you if he's properly motivated.'

'The organization is not set up to depend on any one man,' Goldman replied. 'It can't be. As much as you may believe in what you've accomplished in making him special, Steve Austin is mortal. He can catch a cold, get hit by a truck, or be struck down by a bullet. That means I have to consider him just as vulnerable and, if neces sary, replaceable as anyone else.'

'You're overlooking one thing,' Wells countered. 'Steve can make choices unavailable to any other man. He can take actions in the field impossible for you to foresee back here in Washington. But only if you aren't afraid to give him all the facts.'

'Is that what you think, Rudy? That I'm afraid of Steve Austin?'

'That isn't quite what I said. But it is something to consider. Aren't we always a little afraid of capabilities much greater than our own?'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harry Donner slowly pulled himself from the floor, rubbing his chin.

'He hung up on the chief,' he mumbled in disbelief.

He stumbled up the stairs to the sleeping loft, where Austin was tossing his clothes into a suitcase, ignoring Cynthia, who was sitting silently on the bed.

'Look,' Harry said, 'I know how you must feel about being tricked. But you're a stubborn man, and Oscar figured we needed you.'

'I suppose you were in on this, too,' Austin said to the girl.

'Part of it was duty,' she said, quietly, 'but the important part was . . . was something else.'

'I hope you enjoyed it,' Austin said.

'We *meant* well. We knew you were friends with the Russian. Your presence would keep them preoccupied long enough for us to get a crack at Findletter's arms catalogue. It's important that we get our hands on it, Steve.'

'Not interested.'

Austin walked to the mezzanine railing and tossed the suitcase down onto the couch. He went down the stairs.

'Steve.'

'Let him go,' Donner said. 'We don't need him.'

The girl ran down the stairs after Austin, who was muttering around the living room looking for his clothes.

'All right, Steve,' the girl said, 'if you won't do it for me, or Harry, or Oscar, will you do it to get the man who killed Tamara?'

Austin stood bolt upright; then his shoulders sagged. The anger had been replaced with a complexity of deeper emotions: pain, loss, and hurt.

'Findletter?'

'That's right.'

'If that's true,' Austin asked, 'why didn't they tell me in Washington?'

'We didn't know,' Donner said, descending the stairs. 'It took this long for our people to get the truth.'

'They could have lied about it,' Cynthia Holland said. 'They could have said Findletter was involved when they weren't certain. It would have been a sure way to get you on the case. But Oscar wouldn't use the girl knowing how you felt about her.'

'Maybe I've found his limit, after all,' Austin said, introspectively.

'Will you help us, Steve? We need you.'

'All right, but first I have a personal matter to attend to with an old friend.' Still wearing the bathing suit, Austin left the cottage and began to jog down the beach toward the Russian cottage. It was dark, and there was no moon, and in the distance he saw several people walking across the beach. Austin ran into the shrubbery and stopped to watch. Through the green light of the photo multiplier he could see Koslov and a guard climbing into the cramped cockpit of a small seaplane. The second the door was closed, the engine turned over and was cranked up by an unseen pilot. Austin made a quick decision and began to sprint after the plane. The distance was only a few hundred yards, but already the small plane was hurtling swiftly across the water. Determined to reduce the plane to toothpicks, Austin hit the water at full speed, made a full racing dive, and began to swim. Great clouds

of spray flew off in the propwash, and Austin thought he could hear someone yelling. Suddenly, the water around him exploded with automatic rifle fire. He hesitated, and looked behind him. A guard from the Russian cottage had an automatic pointed at him. The plane was gone, into the air and way, its occupants unaware either of Austin's attempted pursuit or of the rifle fire. Austin stood up and began to walk toward the shore. The guard motioned for him to put his hands in the air, and he did so.

When Austin reached the shore, the guard squinted at him with a look of astonishment.

'What happened to the boat?' he said in a thick accent.

'What boat, pal?'

'The boat.'

'Look, if you missed the ferry, I'm sorry. The next one doesn't leave for an hour.'

'*What happened to the boat?* We have been unable to make radio contact.'

'How should I know?' Austin said. 'Maybe they went for a swim.'

'This way,' the guard said, motioning the American up to the cottage.

'Whatever you say.'

Austin walked toward the gate, which was thrown open by a second guard. This one also seemed astonished to see Austin, and the two guards entered into a long conversation in Russian. Austin's knowledge of the basics of the language was inadequate for the occasion, but good enough to tell him the two men were deciding on how to handle the situation without angering their superiors, in this case, Koslov. Bureaucracy is inevitable, Austin thought.

The inside of the cottage looked as though it once was warm enough, but had of late been turned into a miniature barracks. Cots and portable beds stood where living room furniture should have been, and an elaborate radio took up the entire surface of a coffee table. From a quick

glance, Austin guessed that the Russian complement included Koslov, the girl, and half a dozen functionaries of one sort or another.

'Very nice,' Austin said, 'but you must pay a fortune in taxes.'

'You will tell us what happened to the boat. You and Undersecretary Volana were on the boat.'

'Oh, *that* boat,' Austin said. 'Well, let's make a deal. I'll tell you what happened if you give me a glass of your best vodka.'

'You want vodka?' the man with the gun said.

'You can't get a decent vodka in my country,' Austin said. 'Come on, you can give it to me. Consider it my last request.'

The second guard, who appeared to be unarmed, shrugged and left the room. He returned immediately with a water glass three-quarters full of vodka in one hand, and a bottle in the other. He handed Austin the glass, and the American took a small sip.

'Very nice.'

'*The boat.*'

'Oh, yes. I sank it.'

'You sank it?' the man with the gun said, quite unable to digest the words.

'To the bottom,' Austin said. 'Didn't you know? I sink boats. It's an awful habit. I never get invited to parties any more. I've sunk two in just the past week.'

The Russians were speechless, unable to decide whether Austin was the madman he seemed.

'Miss Volana is okay, I think. She should be back here ... let me see, in about five hours.'

The guard with the gun began to smile. Apparently he had decided that Austin was indeed a madman and that his presence back on shore was due to some inexplicable accident.

'And you did this with your bare hands, no doubt,' the guard sneered.

'That's right. Did you also know that I can run sixty

miles an hour and lift over a thousand pounds with one hand?'

The guards laughed.

'Would you like to see a trick?' Austin asked. 'Watch, I can show you how I can kill that man just by pointing at him.'

Austin set the glass down on top of the radio set. One of the pieces of equipment built into his left hand was a CO_2 powered gun which fired poison darts drawn from a revolving chamber. The gun was in actuality the middle finger of his bionic hand. When he extended the finger straight out and snapped a presslock, a dart was ejected. It dissolved upon penetration of the target's skin, and the poison took effect within six seconds.

It was a weapon he didn't often use, but it was the only one he had which extended beyond the reach of his hands and feet. And with a machine gun turned on him by a very suspicious Russian, there was no choice.

'Let me see this trick,' the man said, laughing.

The other man, a bit nervous but not wanting it to look as though he believed an unarmed man in a bathing suit could actually harm him from a distance of ten feet simply by pointing, stood up, almost at attention. Austin wiggled the fingers of his left hand, then straightened the middle finger and touched the presslock with his thumb. There was an almost inaudible hiss and the man slapped at his cheek, as though killing a mosquito. Within a few seconds, he stumbled forward and crashed to the floor.

Austin hit the other man with a strong right, and yanked the automatic away from him with his left. The guard teetered backwards, then came at Austin. The American blocked the punch with his right, and delivered a stunning bionic punch to the solar plexus. The guard doubled over in pain. Austin spun him around, lifted him over his head, and tossed him through the door, which tore from its hinges and fell flat onto the sandy ground. Austin stood over the guard and fired a

dart into his neck. After retrieving the bottle of vodka, Austin returned to his chalet.

'Anybody care for some of the finest vodka that rubles can buy?' Austin asked, displaying the bottle.

'Nope,' Donner said.

'Steve, what was that plane all about?'

'Koslov leaving. It was a small seaplane. That mean anything to you?'

'He's landed in Nassau,' Donner said. 'Some of our guys saw Koslov and an aide disembarking in the harbor. Presumably, he's meeting Findletter at the casino.'

'How do you know all this, pray tell?' Austin asked, indicating the wreckage of the telephone.

'Briefcase phone. I hope you will leave that one intact.'

'Just behave yourself, Harry, and you have nothing to worry about. Well, what's on the agenda? I recall something about a catalogue?'

'Findletter is an international arms dealer. He has a special catalogue of some sort. That was what was supposed to have been in the safe in Alexandria. We have since found out where it is: In the safe in Findletter's villa outside Nassau.'

'What's so hot about this catalogue?'

'I don't know. The agency, as you know, functions –'

'– strictly on a need-to-know basis,' Austin said, quoting Goldman.

'And I don't know.'

'Office gaff says it's a catalogue of stolen nuclear weapons,' Cynthia said.

'That would,' Austin said respectfully, 'make it a special catalogue.'

'So tonight we get it,' Donner said. 'Findletter and Koslov will be at the casino or thereabouts. I will slip into the villa and get the catalogue, while you go to the casino and create a diversion.'

'The word "diversion," ' Austin said 'will hardly de-

scribe what will happen when I get my hands on those two.'

'Cynthia will go along with you,' Donner said dryly, 'to ensure that all you create is a diversion. We do not want to kill Findletter until we know whether or not he's for real. So tonight, all you do is keep them occupied, hold their attention. Slaughter can come later.'

'I'll go grab a shave and get into some clothes,' Austin said, disappearing upstairs.

'Hey,' Donner yelled, 'did you see Koslov over at the beach house?'

'I missed the plane,' Austin said.

'You didn't have the right man to take you to the airport,' Donner said, and was relieved when the only reply from Austin was a mild expletive.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The late-evening crowd drifted lazily in and out of the Casino, discussing wins and losses, sipping drinks, walking through the maze of landscaped gardens, exchanging phone numbers, and doing all the things people do when they have nothing but leisure on their minds. Among them, however, moved several persons for whom the stakes were much higher than having a pleasant evening under tropical skies.

'I would feel a lot better,' Steve Austin said, 'if I knew what the hell happened to my tux.'

'Maybe Koslov is wearing it,' Cynthia Holland said, pointing to a small knot of people who were walking purposefully from the casino door toward a parking lot.

Koslov and Findletter were talking quietly, followed at a respectful distance by two Findletter aides.

'Well, so much for the casino,' Austin said, 'At least I don't have to convince the management that a golf shirt and slacks are acceptable evening attire.'

Austin and the girl trailed the group, keeping in the shadows, ducking occasionally behind shrubs. In a dark corner of the parking lot, Austin watched the four men get into a large black limousine and start to drive off.

'I'm afraid I'll have to leave you now,' Austin said.

'Where are you going?' the girl called, then lapsed into

awed silence as she watched Austin running with what seemed impossible speed.

The car turned a corner, eased down an exit ramp lined with tall palms, then moved into a long, straight road which was quite dark and very deserted.

Running easily with graceful, ten-foot strides, Austin quickly overtook the limousine. He matched his speed with that of the car, running right behind it, while working the fingers of his left hand under the edge of the trunk lid. With a quick motion, he sprung the latch and pulled open the trunk just wide enough to allow himself to slip inside. Austin curled up on his side, pulling the trunk down until only a slit wide enough for viewing remained open.

The car wound through a succession of quiet, residential streets, through a business area, and down a short stretch of major highway. After but a short ride, the limousine pulled into an area that Austin, even from his limited vantage point, could recognize.

'The heliport,' he mumbled, somewhat disappointed.

The car doors opened, and Austin listened for snatches of conversation. They were not long in coming.

'I hope you will forgive me for having to use the blindfold,' Findletter said. 'I trust you understand.'

'Of course,' the Russian said.

Austin opened the trunk lid far enough to see the four men walking across the heliport to a Ranger not at all unlike the one Cynthia flew.

'Damned things must grow on trees,' Austin mumbled. He slipped silently out of the trunk and closed the lid. Findletter and Koslov along with one of the aides got into the chopper and closed the doors. The rotors began to turn, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Austin broke and ran across the asphalt. The copter was lifting off, the guard who was being left behind temporarily preoccupied not with security, but with getting out of the way. Austin leaped into the air and hit the man fully in the chest with both feet, knocking him, unconscious, twenty

feet off and into the shadows at the side of the area. The copter was ten feet off the ground. Austin moved into a crouch, then sprang into the air, grabbing hold of the port runner as the chopper was just fifteen feet off the ground and turning preparatory to making off in whatever direction lay its destination.

Austin hoisted himself onto the runner. Keeping low to avoid detection, he crawled aft, climbed up a strut to the fuselage, and got into the web of metal struts that formed the afterstructure. Determined to find a detection proof, not to mention safe, hiding place before the chopper got fully under way, he clambered to the top of the afterstructure. Then he crawled forward, belly down to the cold metal, under the rotors to a point directly atop the cabin. His legs pressing against the top of the afterstructure, his bionic hand clasped firmly onto a conduit carrying electrical wires, Austin settled in for a potentially long flight.

The chopper swung around the lights of Nassau, like a huge bird seeking its prey, then swept off toward the north, the lights and boulevards of civilization quickly replaced by the dark of the nighttime sea. Austin could see an occasional yacht and, through the photomultiplier, rows and rows of gentle waves.

The lonely beauty of the sea beneath reminded Austin of his last mission with Marty Schiller, the arms expert who designed, among other weapons, the dart assembly which had saved his life earlier that day. Stealing the 707 was simple enough. What was hard was surviving the long hours alone over the North Atlantic, prowling the aisle of an empty airliner, eating the food, drinking the champagne. In the end, there was nothing to do but look at the sea, the endless stretch of water which drapes across the globe, interconnected in millions of ways by millions of rivers, bays, streams, inlets, and canals. The world is beautiful, Austin thought, but that beauty had only been seen by a select few. There was the time he told McKay of the lunar mission. 'It happened out there,' he said, 'com-

ing around the moon. The very first time, I mean. The effect was greatest then. And every time we had a chance to look at the earth after that, when we took the time to *really* look, to try to understand what we were seeing, well, it's overwhelming. You come around this dead, cratered world and suddenly, over the horizon, a quarter of a million miles away, it's there. Home. That's how you think of it. Like the word never had meaning before. It rolls through space, this beautiful blue world floating against the blackest black there ever was, and you feel you could look around the other side of the earth. The pictures, the films, they don't mean anything because they're flat. But you see it as a round ball, and you hold up both hands by the window of the spacecraft, and you can cup the world in your hands and . . . and well, all of a sudden you feel how fragile it is . . . Anyway,' Austin remembered having told the OSO chief, 'you can at least understand why I can't ever have anything to do with weapons that could tear apart what I saw from out there.'

And here Austin was again, clinging to the top of a machine that was hurtling through the night, above the sea, toward a destination which promised to bring him face to face with a threat to the fragility of the world which had looked so beautiful to him. Beneath him was a strange, quiet man who could be charming, yet had murdered an innocent girl and who was a dealer in mass, probably nuclear destruction. Of course, it had to be nuclear weapons he was after, or else Goldman would not have been so interested. And beneath him was Alexei Koslov, who once was a friend but who had been turned by this man into an enemy whose agents had made attempts on Austin's life. The whole thing was incredible, inexcusable, and sick. He almost yearned for the days of the peace program, when it was all earnest effort in the interests of science – brave and trusting men seeking beyond strength to go where no man had gone before. Those days were gone. Austin had grown up, but into something he had never imagined, or sought to imagine

existed.

His ruminations had served him well. The chopper dropped to an elevation of a thousand feet and appeared to be reaching its destination. In the near distance was the shore of an island. Austin's bionic eye zoomed in on a modern A frame beach house. It was Paradise Cay.

This couldn't, Austin thought, be merely a lift home for Koslov?

Instead, the chopper continued inland. The sea was replaced by grim rows of headstones swathed in grass so green it looked artificial. Small, thin trees lined curving roadways which resembled nothing so much as the lanes and courts of suburban housing developments. Tens of thousands of loyal Bahamians and sentimental tourists found their rewards there, in that sprawling cemetery which gave Paradise Cay its name. And in the middle of it stood the ultimate monument, a modern ten-storey mausoleum, a high-rise museum of death.

The copter swung into a low circle, allowing Austin to study the bare, windowless pressed-concrete facade made elaborate by ground-to-roof pseudo Grecian columns. It dropped to a landing on the flat roof, the rotors slowed and stopped, and Austin relaxed his grip on the top of the craft. Both doors opened simultaneously, and Findletter emerged with the pilot, a guard, and Alexei Koslov. With the Russian still blindfolded, the group of men walked across the roof to a small outcropping of concrete and asphalt which formed both a door to the interior of the building and the top of the elevator shaft. When the door closed after them, Austin lowered himself to the rooftop heliport and made his way to the entrance.

Inside the door, Austin could hear the muffled sound of voices.

'I am sorry that you could not have enjoyed the ride,' Findletter said. 'Even at night it is beautiful.'

'I came to see missiles,' the Russian replied. 'Not palm trees.'

'And so you shall,' Findletter laughed.

Austin could hear the sound of an elevator door opening and closing. He pulled open the door and stepped into the concrete cubicle to watch the numbers light on the elevator console. The car moved swiftly to the floor marked 'Sub Basement C,' the lowest floor, then stopped. Quickly, he ran up a short flight of stairs to a door marked 'Danger: Keep out.' Austin yanked the door from its hinges and stepped into the room containing the elevator roof assembly. Through a metal grate, he could see down a long, square tunnel of darkness to the bottom of the shaft, where tiny sprays of light leaked from machine holes and various other apertures in the elevator car. Austin grabbed a corner of the grate in his left hand and pulled up sharply. The grate lifted from its mountings, and Austin propped it up against the wall

He lowered himself into the shaft feet first and gripped the thick elevator cable with his left hand. Adjusting the pressure of his hand upon the cable precisely the correct amount to allow a modest rate of descent, he slid down the cable, coming to a silent landing atop the car. A small fiberglass panel served as an emergency trap door for escape from the car in case of fire or other calamity, or for the use of repairmen. Austin lifted it and dropped into the car, refitting the panel in place. Chancing the unlikely possibility of a guard outside the elevator door, he pressed the 'Open' button.

The doors parted silently, a blessing, as the elevator was at one end of a long and sterile corridor and there was indeed a guard with a rifle across his chest. But the man had his back to the elevator, apparently unwilling to believe that a person could emerge from the conveyance without its first having made a round trip to another floor. Austin brought his palms together over the man's ears. The guard gave a quick and agonized yelp, then crumpled to the floor. Austin dragged him into a utility closet and closed the door.

Austin moved off down the corridor, staying close to one wall. Throughout the floor was the unmistakable

buzzing of a large electric generator, which Austin made a mental note was off to the left someplace, probably down a smaller, dead end corridor which led from the main one. Halfway down the main hall, he came to a large window behind which was a control center of some sort. It was a two part chamber, with the electronic gear that was in use being kept in a semicircular main control room, and an assortment of standby equipment kept in another semicircular chamber, this one dark. A single door led into an antechamber from which one could go to either the lighted or the dark room. Moving, quietly, Austin slipped into the darkened room.

The control center was quite a sight. In the center sat a console tied into the functions displayed along the curving wall. Those components included a computer array, telemetry equipment which performed a function Austin could not imagine, a vast radio assembly, and a number of television monitors, which probably, the American thought, had something to do with the telemetry

Standing in the control room along with Findletter and two white-robed technicians was the Russian. He was rubbing his eyes, accustoming himself to the light, the blindfold only just having been removed.

'Welcome to the world's largest private underground arsenal,' Findletter said proudly.

'Incredible,' Koslov mumbled.

'The monitors will display our wares to you Nuclear weapons in every category, from motor shells to air-to-air missiles and surface-to surface missiles.'

'The Soviet government is not interested in pilfered ordnance,' Koslov said. 'I'm here to inspect the Sawfly missile which you claim to have in your possession.'

'I don't *claim* to have it. I have it. I have four, as a matter of fact.'

'Four!' Koslov said, shocked. 'Since we have never lost a Sawfly, at least that we know of, I must insist on inspecting them first-hand. I cannot trust any possible illusion you might create on a television screen.'

'Of course,' Findletter said, graciously. 'Come this way.'

The two men left the control room, entered the main corridor, and turned. Austin crept to the door and watched them as they approached a huge, sliding door built into the wall of the corridor near the far end. The double thick metal door opened to a width of more than twenty feet, undoubtedly due to the need to accommodate very large objects. It moved slowly on a steel track, taking nearly five seconds to open. The moment the two men stepped inside, Austin made for the entryway and edged into the room just before the steel doors snapped shut.

Findletter and Koslov were walking to the center of a huge cavern, blasted out of solid rock half a mile underground. The cavern was nearly a hundred yards in diameter, with rough, craggy, and creviced walls except for a smooth metal strip a score of feet high. This strip, dotted seven times with huge, circular doors, wound around the entire circumference of the cavern. An eighth door was under construction, but at that time was only a crude hole in the rock wall. Austin made for it, reaching the safety of its walls just as Findletter reached the console.

The console was little more than a modern speaker's podium, an array of square, numbered buttons on a rectangular panel atop a short post. Findletter pressed button number one. Slowly, one of the huge circular doors came to life, sliding with a grating whirr of machinery into a bay built into the wall. Track led from the inside of the horizontal silo, which the door had obscured, to a position at the center of the cavern. Similar track led from each of the other six silos. With another annoying burst of machine noise, a huge submarine-fired Soviet ballistic missile lying on a cradle moved along the track and stopped in the center of the room.

Findletter was proud as a new father. 'One of the only four Sawfly missiles in existence outside of the Soviet navy's underwater fleet,' he said.

Koslov stared at the missile in numb shock. Slowly, he

walked up to it.

'The S.E.R.B. Sawfly missile,' Findletter said. 'A cluster warhead capable of delivering two hundred megatons over a range of three thousand miles.'

'How could a man like you come to possess these weapons?' Koslov asked quietly.

'The arrangement was that I would sell them back to you,' Findletter said, 'not give away trade secrets.'

'There can be only one source for these missiles,' the Russian concluded. 'And that is a submarine which sank two months ago. They must be her missiles.'

'*Were* her missiles. She sank in international waters. The law of salvage grants ownership of anything in the sea to whoever can claim it from the depths.'

'And what of her crew? One hundred and sixty-five men.'

'What could I know of them? Or do you suggest I *seized* her missiles?'

'No. It would have been impossible for one of our nuclear submarines to be attacked. At least, not without our knowing it. They are in constant communication with our admiralty.'

'Let us leave the matter of my techniques alone,' Findletter said, 'and return to the business at hand. Do you wish to buy these from me, or not?'

'Your catalogue also mentions a Polaris missile.'

Once again proud and smiling, Findletter pressed a button on the console, and the Sawfly returned to its silo, the door closing after it. Then he pressed button number seven, and a silo at the opposite side of the cavern swung open. Slowly, a red white-and blue Polaris missile moved to the center of the room.

'A two stage, solid-propellant missile with inertial guidance system,' Findletter beamed. 'Submarine-launched, quite capable of removing an entire city from the map. It's the old standby of the American nuclear fleet.'

'So the Americans are indeed in the same unhappy boat as we,' Koslov mused.

Findletter pressed another button on the console, and the Polaris slid back into its silo.

'Well?'

'I don't have any instructions on negotiating for an American Polaris missile,' Kosiov said 'I'll need time.'

'To talk to the Americans?' Findletter asked suspiciously.

'We are *not* working together.'

'Judging by the speed with which you disposed of Mr Austin, I believe you. But, if at any time prior to the delivery of these weapons I should be given reason to doubt that position, I warn you in advance of the consequences.'

The two men walked to the door leading from the cavern, and Findletter pressed the exit button.

'I will go to any lengths to protect my investment ... and my customers,' Findletter said as he led a distraught Russian from the room. 'Which now seem to include you, Comrade Kosiov.'

When Austin was safely alone in the cavern, he moved swiftly to the console and pressed button number seven. When the Polaris was halfway out of its silo, he halted it. He ran over to the gleaming instrument and ran his hands over the surface until he found a stamped metal plate. In deep letters, it read 'Polaris E Series 617711.' Austin fumbled in his pockets, found a matchbook and the stub of a pencil, and copied the number. Then he returned the missile to its silo, jogged over to the corridor door, and pressed the button to open it. He peered cautiously toward the elevator in time to see the door closing on Findletter, Kosiov, a guard, and the chopper pilot. Once again, the Russian wore a blindfold. The elevator began its ascent to the roof.

Austin could not possibly make his way to the roof in time to hitch another ride. He was alone in the underground camp of the enemy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Austin did not care the slightest bit for the idea of being trapped beneath the ground in the middle of a cemetery. For one thing, it reminded him too much of his first mission for OSO. The Russians, acting with the connivance of a local government, had built a submarine base in a huge, partially underwater cavern along the northeastern coast of South America. Into this base, the Russians had moved several of their new submarines, the SSBN-Y, which carried 16 Sawfly missiles, and the SSN-V, an attack submarine without missile capability. The Russians protected their base with an elaborate array of defenses. Czechoslovakian surface to air, radar-directed missiles warded off intruding planes, and patrol boats and armed divers guarded the underwater approach to the base. As further cover, the Russians moved in fake oil derricks and hydrographic research equipment, and they spread oil mixed with iron filings throughout the nearby water to render useless American satellite infra red and magnetic anomaly detectors.

The White House felt that if the true Russian purpose in the area were proved, it would evidence a clear viola tion of the agreement which came out of the so called Cuban Missile Crisis. American diplomats would be able to go to the United Nations with this evidence and de

mand a pullback. The project of collecting evidence was given to OSO. Oscar Goldman gave it to Steve Austin.

OSO equipped Austin with nearly as much paraphernalia as the Russians had in their underwater base. The leg air tank, mask, and swim fins were created for that occasion. Austin had the miniature camera which was Rudy Wells's initial replacement for the lost eye. Austin also had standard scuba gear, plus two of the most incredible devices ever devised for espionage purposes: one-man submarines in the exact form of porpoises, one for Austin to ride inside, the other to give the illusion that an interloping former astronaut was really a school of fish. Austin rode the computer-controlled artificial fish into the underground base, grabbed his pictures, and navigated out. Now standing in Findletter's hewn rock arsenal, Austin was struck by the similarity between this one and the dank cave where the Russians had been storing their deadly wares. Once, armies and their arsenals were paraded, in full dress uniform, for all the world to see. Now, they are hidden in silos and caverns blasted out of the earth and lined with transistors and monitors. Austin was determined to get out of Findletter's with all due speed.

He moved along the wall of the corridor, stopping short of the window to the control room. Inside, the two technicians were making adjustments on a computer display. Austin slipped by the window and came to the branch corridor, from which he recalled having heard generator noise. He stepped down the small corridor and forced open a door. Inside was a huge, dark room dominated by an electric generator run off a large diesel engine. Using his left eye, Austin magnified the light in the room and quickly traced the power circuits.

The main output of the generator ran into a six-foot-high control box near the door. Austin opened it, but was unable to determine which of the feeder circuits fed the electronic equipment, the computers and telemetry, and which ran such relatively mundane luxuries as lights, air

conditioning, and the elevator. Austin closed the box and concentrated on the generator. Behind it was a standby generator, of the same type but smaller, with its own fuel supply and its own output spliced into the output from the main generator. Using his bionic arm, Austin yanked out the splice, then incapacitated the auxiliary generator. He did this as a safety precaution. He could always knock out the main generator, and now he could be sure there would be no auxiliary to replace it.

He left the generator room and the branch corridor and found the main hall still empty. Apparently Findletter considered his underground arsenal so secure, he saw no need to leave much muscle in it. It was a sure bet that armed men were *someplace* in the building, though, probably on the ground level. Well, Austin thought, into the fire.

He walked briskly to the elevator and pressed the button. The doors swung open, and he stepped inside and pressed the button for the roof. He might be able to get down the outside of the building; at least it was a surer bet than just walking out through the door. The elevator ran smoothly until it passed ground level. But the second it proceeded on upstairs, a deafening shriek sounded all around the building. Findletter's guards were on ground level, and one of them who knew that no elevator should be heading for the roof at that time had pressed the alarm. The elevator came to an abrupt halt on the fifth floor, the lights went out, and the doors opened.

Instinctively, Austin threw himself against the wall. As he did, a stream of bullets ripped the rear of the car. Austin saw the barrel of a rifle, and with a motion too fast to imagine he grabbed it with his bionic hand and hurled both gun and guard against the back wall of the car. A sharp hand to the base of the skull put the guard out, and Austin had himself a fine Russian-made submachine gun. He stepped outside the car.

He was five floors above ground in the mausoleum which served as cover for Findletter's arsenal. The stairs,

adjacent to the elevator shaft, were full of armed guards. He could hear them running up from ground level. The hall in which Austin stood was a long, wide one, made entirely of pressed concrete, like the outside of the building. The atmosphere was cold and uncomfortable, the result of overly zealous climate control. The drabness of the hall was offset slightly by a series of modern sculptures done in black ivory and built into the walls at regular intervals. Still, there was no way the floor could be mistaken for anything other than what it was: a burial-place. Every ten feet, there was an ornate brass door. Most of these doors bore name plaques; some of them had two and three. Apparently, people who spent all their lives in apartments felt uncomfortable under the sod, so they leased one-room flats in Findletter's high-rise tombstone.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs grew louder. Austin ran down the hall until he found a door with no name plaque on it. He pushed the door, and was surprised to find it unlocked. Austin stepped inside and closed the door after him, leaving only a slit through which to view the hall. The footsteps grew louder, until the stairwell door flew open and three men, each armed with a rifle, emerged. While they paused outside the elevator, gaping at the body of their companion, Austin stepped quietly into the hall.

'Gentlemen,' he said.

The trio whirled in his direction and were met with a burst of rifle fire. Only one managed to discharge his weapon, and the shots went into the ceiling. Austin then selected a fresh gun from one of the men and slipped cautiously into the stairwell. He ran down the stairs to the fourth floor, paused briefly to listen for guards, then descended to the third floor. When he paused on that landing, he heard the sound of running feet once again.

Austin slipped out of the door into the third-floor hallway, an exact duplicate of the hall in which he had just eliminated four men. He hid next to the door while a group of four guards passed, yelling and cursing, on their

way to the fifth floor. As their footsteps receded, Austin crept back into the stairwell. He began to make his way down to the second floor.

'Halt!'

Austin slammed into the wall as a burst of machine-gun fire skimmed his cheek.

'He's on two,' he heard someone yell. The voice came from above. Austin pulled the trigger on the machine gun and sprayed the stairwell with random fire. The guard who had discovered him had to hit the deck, which gave Austin time to escape down the stairs and into the hall on the second floor. He ran down the hall, the sound of yelling men growing louder behind him. The very last cubicle bore a plaque. It read:

CHARLES O. GOLDMAN

1913-1970

'Goldman . . .' Austin smiled. 'It's about time that name did me some good.' He leaned back and kicked the door. The lock groaned and snapped, and as he ducked into the room, he heard someone cry, 'Down there!'

Inside the room was a solitary coffin, an expensive brass one set on a concrete slab. Austin threw down his gun, crouched behind the coffin, and pushed both it and the slab on which it rested against the closed door. The guards reached the door, and when pushing failed to move it, a stream of bullets came crashing through. Austin jumped to one side, glanced at the concrete wall ahead of him, then down at the coffin, which had taken several hits.

'I did it for Oscar,' Austin said apologetically. 'I hope you understand.'

With a great burst of energy, Austin hurtled across the room and hit the wall with his shoulder. The wall burst open, pieces of concrete and powdered concrete blowing outwards as if fired from a shotgun. Austin tumbled through the seven-foot hole, fell fifteen feet to the ground, and landed on his side between the base of the building and a row of shrubbery. He scrambled to his

feet and began to run.

The blackness of the cemetery complex exploded with light. Momentarily blinded, Austin stumbled and fell, and crawled behind a tombstone for cover. After a few seconds, his eyes adjusted to the sodium arc lamps, and he peeked around his marble shield toward the building. A score of men with rifles were pouring out of the front door and from a ramp leading up from the basement. Austin got to his feet again and took off across the field. Within half a minute, he encountered a narrow roadway which he remembered from his helicopter flight as being the straight one leading to the gate. As he reached it, bullets dug into the asphalt at his feet. He began to run down the road, accelerating to twenty five, to thirty, to fifty, and finally to sixty five miles per hour. In his mind he had a clear picture of the treadmill in the bionics lad and Rudy Wells warning him not to break the machine. A fancy chain link fence loomed ahead. Of course, it would be electric. Austin slowed his pace to about half what it had been and hurled himself into the air, feet first. A crackle of electricity and the familiar sound of metal being ripped from its mountings accompanied the burst ing outward of the gate. Findletter's guards were literally a mile behind him and probably more. Sure, they would have cars, but they were still too far behind to catch up. He got to his feet and began to run leisurely down the road. He covered the five miles from the cemetery to the beach house in ten minutes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The beach house was empty, and there was no sign of life at the Russian cottage. Koslov was probably just returning to the casino at that point, Austin thought. It was just as well. Now he would have the Russians looking for him, and the beach house was the first place they'd think of. Koslov would come there, anyway. As far as Austin knew, nobody at the mausoleum who saw his face lived to identify it. And Austin had things to discuss with people. He removed his clothes from the house, including the bottle of Koslov's vodka, a six pack of Bass ale, and the makings of a sandwich. He piled it all into the speedboat, cast off the lines, and roared off at full power for Nassau.

It was three in the morning when Austin rapped on the door of Cynthia Holland's apartment.

'Who is it?' she asked.

'Me. Steve.'

The door swung open, and Austin walked into a pretty, one bedroom flat on the tenth floor of a twelve storey high-rise.

'I got the catalogue,' Donner said, waving a small book printed on glossy paper. 'Findletter's as phony as a salesman's smile. Mission's over.'

'Over?' Austin said, incredulously.

'That's right,' the girl added. 'And a lot of help you turned out to be. It's a good thing Findletter was out all night. It took Harry six hours to crack his safe.'

'Better a little slow than a "no show,"' Donner retorted. 'What happened, anyway? You can't seem to go near those Russians without disappearing.'

'Never mind that. Why are you saying the mission's over?'

'Because Findletter's peddling Polaris missiles to the world, and there's no way he could have any. I've already phoned Oscar and told him we're on our way. I see you're packed.'

'This?' Austin asked, dropping the suitcase by the door and himself onto the couch. 'I just felt it was likely to become unhealthy at the beach house. I was becoming the ... unh ... most sought-after person on the beach. I think you'd better call Oscar back.'

Austin took the matchbook from his pocket and flipped it to Donner, who scanned it.

'What's this?'

'The serial number of a Polaris missile in one of Findletter's silos.'

'I don't know what you think you saw,' Donner said, 'but it couldn't have been a Polaris. That's the most secure weapon we have.'

'Check it out.'

Donner picked up Findletter's catalogue and flipped through it.

'I know what I'll find,' he said. 'Findletter's an out-and out fraud. Look at this. He's offering an entire United States Poseidon submarine for sale with a full complement of sixteen Poseidon missiles. Steve, I don't know how familiar you are with the Poseidon, but it's so new the first one isn't being launched until the twelfth of this month.'

'Harry, that's tomorrow.'

'Come on, Steve. It's the most impregnable warship

we've ever built –'

'And the Polaris is the most secure weapon we've ever had.'

'You're not suggesting –'

'Harry, I've seen enough to know that if Findletter says he's going to have a Poseidon sub, I'd start locking 'em up at night.'

'You expect me to call Oscar and tell him a story like that?'

'I expect you to make a decision, Harry,' Austin said. 'Not one by the book. Not one that you think Oscar Goldman would approve. Not one that'll keep your shirts clean. But one that Harry Donner believes is the right one.'

Donner stared into his hands for a long minute, then reached for the phone. He dialed a number and waited while it rang.

'Give me the OSO computer room,' he said quietly.

Austin smiled, stood up, and stretched.

'If you don't mind,' he said to the girl, 'I will take one of your Bloody Marys now. A double. And if there is anything to eat in the house, I can use that, too. I don't know if you ever tried to make a ham sandwich with one hand while steering a speedboat with another.'

'Coming up,' Cynthia said. 'One double Bloody and some leftover lasagna.' And she headed obediently into the kitchen. Austin strolled to the window and looked out across the lights of Nassau to the sea. The green-and-red running lights of several yachts could be seen, and above the harbor, a small seaplane was gaining altitude and banking in the direction of Paradise Cay.

Austin accepted the drink from the girl and took a long, thoughtful sip. He turned to Harry Donner, who had just set down the phone and who looked white.

'That Polaris serial number?' he said, numbly. 'The computer really choked on it.'

'I was right.'

Donner nodded.

'Well, Harry,' Austin said, the joy of being redeemed all over his face, 'before you call Oscar, let me tell you some of the other things I saw.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'Is there any explanation,' Alexei Koslov asked the pilot, 'for our inability to contact the boat?'

'None,' the pilot said, grimly.

'And the house? What do they say?'

'We have been unable to contact the house, either.'

Koslov turned his attention away from the window, where he had been gazing blankly out over the stretch of Grand Bahamas Bank between Nassau and Paradise Cay.

'I don't believe I understood you,' he said.

'The house is not answering. Neither the radio nor the telephone are being answered.'

'The Americans,' Koslov said quietly.

'Sir?'

'The Americans are behind this. Austin must have had a specific time to check in. When he failed to do so, they moved in. There is no other explanation for both the boat and the house being silent. What was the last known position of the boat?'

'North northeast of Paradise Cay, distance thirty miles,' the pilot said.

'Did they report anything?'

'Nothing. The last thing they said was that Austin wanted to go fishing.'

'Fishing?'

'He seemed to have acceded to our terms of his confine ment.'

'They are all with the fish by now,' Koslov said dully. 'Can we look for them? Can we make a search for the boat?'

'Not without first returning to the beach house and picking up the strong spotlight,' the pilot said. 'And then it would be one light against the entire ocean.'

'You are right. We shall return to the cottage. At least there we might learn something.'

Koslov stared down at the water, making a half-hearted attempt to spot the sports-fishing boat that so recently had been turned into a floating prison for his friend, Steve Austin. The whole business was unfortunate, but inevitable. Austin was an ex astronaut who had gone over to intelligence following a bad accident. He himself was an eminent Soviet rocket scientist who also had loaned his talents to the field of international espionage and intrigue. Not only were their backgrounds similar, so were their new careers. They had to come to blows sooner or later. Koslov only wished the confrontation might have been postponed longer. It would have been nice to have one more weekend to lose themselves in wine, women, and idle adventure – as Austin put it, 'to raise hell.' But now they were enemies in a small war of nerves. Sad, Koslov thought, but it had to be, it had to be.

The seaplane began its slow descent, and then the pontoons were slicing the surface of the water, building great walls of spray in the night. The pilot edged the pontoons up on the beach, and Koslov walked gingerly down one until he was able to leap onto the sand. Standing there wrapped in a blanket and looking very tired was Katrina Volana. Koslov stared at her quizzically.

'They're both dead,' she said, cocking her head in the direction of the cottage.

'They? Who's dead.'

'Kroshenko and Tamarov,' she said. 'Dead. Means unknown. The house is a wreck. There was quite a fight.

Before he died, Tamarov seems to have been thrown through the back door.'

'And how do you think this happened?'

'The Americans? Findletter doesn't have a reason, does he?'

'No, he doesn't.'

'The Americans must have been responsible,' she said. 'Retribution for Austin.'

'What do you mean "retribution?" '

'Austin is dead,' she said, downcast and embarrassed.

'And the boat?'

'Sunk.'

'*Sunk?*'

'Austin escaped. He went overboard. In our zeal to find him, we must have struck a reef.'

'There are no reefs for many more miles than you would have gone.'

'Then we hit an obstruction. How should I know? The point is that there was no explosion of any kind, yet the boat sank.'

'How did Austin escape?'

'I told you. He went overboard.'

'Katrina, precisely how did he go overboard?'

'He . . .' she hesitated and shuffled her feet, not wanting to say it. 'He ripped out a porthole.'

Koslov raised an eyebrow, but did not speak.

'I don't expect you to believe it. I scarcely believe it myself. But I saw it. We were in the stateroom. He tied me up. He reached into the porthole with his hand and pulled it from the wall. Then he pulled out a section of wall and dived through it.'

'Did he offer any explanation for this incredible strength?'

'No. He made some remark. Something about being sorry for violating my porthole.'

Koslov let loose an involuntary burst of laughter.

'I believe you,' he said. 'Only Austin would say that. I am glad to see that whatever his plane crash did to him,

it did not ruin his sense of humor.'

'I am sorry he is dead. I knew you and he were close.'

'How did you kill him? Was he shot?'

'He was shot at. I do not know if any of the bullets struck him.'

'Then how do you know he is dead?'

'He must be. We circled for an hour, in the lifeboat. The yacht sank immediately. We could not find him. He must be dead. He had no swimming equipment, other than a simple bathing suit.'

'Austin rips a hole in the side and goes overboard, and immediately the boat sinks–'

'That hole didn't sink it. It was four feet above the waterline. Right after Austin went into the water, we hit something. Or something hit us. The boat rocked. It had to have struck a reef.'

'Fascinating,' Koslov said, 'Steve Austin rips a hole in the side of an extremely well-built yacht, and somebody kills two of our men by means unknown and throws one of them through a door. Well, such mysteries require a few drinks and a cigar. Let's go and find some. You look like you're about to freeze to death, anyway.'

The two Russians walked into the cottage, stopping briefly so Koslov could examine the remains of the back door. A few drinks and a Cuban cigar later, Koslov was saved the difficulty of making a decision by a radio message. The pilot, who doubled as chief radioman, announced that they had received a message from one of their contacts in Nassau.

'The American Colonel Austin,' the pilot said, 'was seen disembarking from his speedboat and getting into a taxi, en route to places unknown.'

Koslov's eyebrows once again threatened to touch his hairline. Katrina Volana was similarly confused.

'And when did this occur?' Koslov asked.

'An hour and ten minutes ago, sir.'

"That's impossible!' Katrina yelled. 'Even if he did live to swim ashore, he'd still be swimming! He was 25 miles

from shore. Swimming at two miles an hour, that's 12 hours. It's only been six or seven since he escaped.'

Koslov seemed to be talking to himself. 'Findletter and I were just returning to the casino tonight when he received a call from his arsenal, the same arsenal we had just visited. Ten minutes after we left, an intruder was discovered within the walls. Before he escaped, that intruder killed four of Findletter's men. And do you know how he escaped?'

Katrina shook her head.

'He broke a hole in a wall. A concrete wall. Findletter was convinced we didn't do it, we can be thankful for that. He is sure we weren't followed on our journey to his arsenal. He's convinced it was the Americans.'

'And you?'

'It was *an* American. Steven Austin.'

'Should we send some men to find and kill him?' the pilot asked.

Koslov thought a moment. 'No. You *find* him. It is I who will have to kill him.'

'How does a man break down a concrete wall?' Katrina asked. 'Hidden explosives?'

Koslov shrugged. 'Who knows?' he said. 'He does it, that is all.'

'And now he must die?'

Koslov nodded, drained his glass, and walked from the cottage, to stare for a while at the ocean.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By ten a.m. the morning of September 12, Steve Austin had risen from his few hours' sleep, shaved, showered, and breakfasted. Donner had been on the scrambler since eight, harassing various offices in Washington like a trooper. Finally, he slammed down the phone. 'Well, I got half of what I wanted,' he said.

'What's that, Harry?'

'They will not – repeat, not – change the course of the submarine. They even intimated I was crazy.'

'Can you imagine that?' Cynthia called from the bath room, where she had been showering.

'They did tell me the course the Poseidon will take in this area. And they're letting me board her. Cyn's going to fly me out.'

'What's the course?' Austin asked, spreading a nautical chart across the coffee table.

'She'll steam down the Gulf Stream, into the Straits of Florida, then swing ninety degrees east into North west Providence Channel. She'll run along the surface right on the ledge where the Grand Bahama Bank slips off into the deeper waters of the channel.'

'Checking her depth ranging,' Austin said. 'They want to run along a section which has great variations in depth, yet is well-charted.'

'After that the sub will sail through the North-east Channel, slip between Great Abaco and Eleuthera islands, and into the open sea.'

'She'll never make it that far,' Austin said. 'Findletter will nail her right on the edge of the Bank, somewhere between two and five miles north of Paradise Cay.'

'I wish I knew how,' Donner said.

'So do I, Harry, so do I.'

'What are your plans for the next couple of hours, Steve? The sub isn't due in the area you mentioned until five this afternoon.'

'Well, Harry, I thought I'd get in a little fishing.'

'What?'

'Look, I was out in that area fishing the first day I was here. Three or four miles off Paradise Cay. And you know what I saw? Bell buoys. Channel markers.'

'So?'

'So there's no channel that needs marking.'

'You said the water is shallow on the Bank and drops off sharply.'

'Sure it does. It drops from one hundred meters to eight hundred meters. But a hundred meters is as shallow as it gets in that area. There isn't a boat in the world that will run aground in a hundred meters of water. So why have channel markers?'

'You tell me?'

'When I was inside Findletter's arsenal, I saw a control room with a lot of electronic equipment, including telemetry gear. As you know, telemetry is the transmission of data from a sensor to a receptor. You only have telemetry stuff when you want to measure something which is inconveniently located, such as out in space or in the middle of the ocean. I saw telemetry receivers in the arsenal, but no sensors.'

'You don't have one without the other,' Donner said.

'I figure they're in the buoys. Findletter placed them there to monitor the movements of the submarine. I'm going to go out and have a look.'

'Why doesn't Cyn just fly you out?'

Austin shook off the suggestion. 'Too conspicuous,' he said. 'Besides, Harry, I might get the chance to do some fishing. Like you told me once, they got fish a mile long.'

'I've got to call Oscar,' Donner said, and he returned to the phone. Taking the nautical chart with him, Austin left the apartment building and took a cab back to the dock. He refuelled, bought some trolling lures and bait, and started off for the waters near Paradise Cay, completely unaware that his departure course had been noted by a Russian and conveyed by radio to Alexei Koslov.

It was another beautiful Bahamian day. If anything, the waters were clearer than ever, and Austin could see every detail of the multicolored sea bottom some thirty feet beneath him. The temptation to swim was almost overwhelming, and Austin foresaw being overwhelmed by it before the hour was out. A boat or a fast plane will steer itself for a short time, and Austin let it do just that while he changed into his suit. It was 11:30. Paradise Cay was looming larger on the horizon. He would be upon it in a few minutes, then swing east around the eastern tip, cut back to the west, and come up on the buoys from the south, that is, from behind. When he neared them he would drop to trolling speed, put out a few lines, and try to pass himself off as a fisherman. In the unlikely event that the sensors were activated that early in the day, he might still avoid arousing suspicion.

When the Cay was less than ten miles away, Austin swung to the east, determined to keep as far away from shore as possible in order to avoid the Russians. But just after he swung off and turned his attention toward Paradise Cay for a reference point, Austin saw the seaplane making speed across the water. When the plane left the water and banked in his direction, Austin swore quietly and pushed the throttle as far forward as it would go. A futile gesture, he knew, as his boat's twenty-five to thirty

knots would far from outrun the seaplane's top of a hundred thirty. He knew he could outmaneuver it, but for how long?

Well, he thought, eyeing the plane's approach, this is either hello or goodbye. Austin knew it had to be the latter and he knew that Koslov was there to kill him. He too had heard Findletter's warning against any connivance between the Americans and him. And Austin realized that Findletter might well consider the 'upheaval' in the mausoleum, occurring as it did right after Koslov's exit, to be connivance. That would force Koslov, in order to be ensured of the success of his mission, to bring Findletter Austin's head on a platter. Or failing that, to ensure that no further 'upheavals' occurred.

The speedboat was streaking across the crystal clear flats, throwing spray impossible distances, yet rock steady on a secure plane in calm water. Steering with one hand, Austin turned to face the stern. The seaplane was making its first approach slowly, low to the water, just twenty or thirty feet off the surface. Austin closed his right eye and zoomed in with his left. He could see Koslov in the passenger's seat holding some sort of weapon. A second man was piloting the craft. Austin stared at Koslov expressionlessly as the seaplane passed overhead.

That run was just to make sure of the identity of the target, Austin thought. The next one would be for real.

The moment the plane passed overhead, Austin grabbed his tackle box and yanked it open. Inside were a half-dozen four-ounce lead sinkers. He hefted one in his bionic hand, and lined the others on the dash. The seaplane banked and circled and began to come in for the kill. Austin, zooming in once again, could see Koslov slide open the passenger's window, lean out, and take aim with a grenade rifle.

As he watched, he saw the Russian's finger begin to move on the trigger. Instinctively, Austin yanked the wheel sharply to the right. There was a flash of light, a crashing roar, and a column of spray rose off the portside

of the speedboat. The plane passed overhead and banked for another run.

I have several things in my favor, Austin thought, maneuverability and the inefficiency of Koslov's weapon. It was deadly enough, but only with a direct hit. Anything falling into the water would not harm him too bady. And it was notoriously hard to hit a target with that type of weapon. Originally it was designed for use by infantrymen who wanted to take out tanks moving at perhaps ten miles per hour across the field of fire at a distance of about a hundred feet. It was unwieldy, and its shell had low velocity. Austin could easily spot the muzzle flash and yank the wheel in a split second's less time than it took the grenade to complete its trajectory.

The seaplane was coming in for a third run, this time lower and more slowly than before. Austin zoomed in and saw the muzzle flash. This time he yanked left, and the grenade exploded off the starboard side. This was a tactic left over from the great naval battles of World War II. Each time a shell landed to port, the commander of the boat being fired upon would steer to port, thus throwing off the enemy's guns, which would take notice of the miss and correct to starboard. A boat could zig zag in and out of misses all day. But Austin didn't have all day, and neither did Koslov. Whatever the resolution of the battle, it would have to come soon.

The next time the Russian tried and missed, Austin, instead of maintaining course, made a rapid turn in the direction opposite that of the seaplane's turn. Thus when they converged for the fifth time, they met head on. The boat's thirty knots plus the plane's sixty meant that Koslov was firing an unwieldy weapon at a target headed right down his throat at a speed of ninety knots. That time he fired and missed, but by a huge margin.

The plane banked to port, so Austin turned to starboard. Both crafts made wide, sweeping and dramatic turns, but when they straightened for their sixth convergence, Austin curled his fingers around a fishing

weight and let it fly at the seaplane. It traveled like the golf ball Austin had overhit a few days earlier, rocketing toward the approaching plane like a surface to-air missile. It missed, but the plane swerved off, the pilot apparently assuming that Austin had launched a grenade in his direction.

Austin spun the wheel and took the boat back to a new heading. It was time to end the battle, and he had a plan. He began to push the roaring speedboat straight for shore, about seven miles away, in the hope of creating the impression he was making a break for land. The seaplane bore in on him once again. Once again Koslov leaned out of the window with his rifle. This time, as he was about to fire, Austin took his hand off the wheel and grasped the ignition key. He went into a crouch, and then he saw the muzzle flash. The grenade exploded just off the port side, and in the split second that the boat was obscured by spray, Austin shut down the ignition and hurled himself into the air, falling on his back a dozen yards from the rapidly slowing craft. The seaplane roared over. Koslov would lose sight of him for a moment. Austin dove for the bottom, less than twenty five feet down in crystal-clear water. When he reached it, he groped for the mouthpiece and plastic air tube built into his right leg. He quickly turned on the oxygen, clamped the breathing device between his teeth, and lay face down in the bottom sand, his arms and legs drifting motionlessly.

'He's dead, sir,' the pilot said tersely.

'Circle again,' Koslov ordered.

The pilot did so. On their second pass over the area, the same body lay in the same spot. And so it was on the third, fourth, and fifth passes. Eight minutes went by and still Austin had not moved.

'You are right,' Koslov said. 'He is dead.'

The Russian sighed deeply and let his head sink into his hands as the seaplane banked for the last time and flew off in the direction of the cottage on Paradise Cay. Five minutes later, Steve Austin turned his head to peer

cautiously toward the surface. He could neither see nor hear anything. He pushed off from the bottom and rose slowly to the surface. The boat was drifting silently a few hundred yards downwind. There was no plane to be seen, not anywhere. Austin swam to his boat, started the ignition, and took off. Once it was back on a full plane and headed for its destination, Austin replaced the breathing apparatus and shut off the flow.

I hope the next mission I get, he thought, isn't at the seashore. I have gotten tired of being drowned.

At 12:10, less than half an hour after his death by drowning, Steve Austin arrived at his destination on the northern lip of Grand Bahamas Bank. Three miles off shore, he found the first of three channel markers. The other two were placed at three mile intervals in a straight line running off in the direction of the Straits of Florida. Austin brought the speedboat to trolling speed, hastily tied three feet of wire leader, a large swivel, and a bunker spoon onto the end of his line, set the pole in its holder, and let a hundred yards of thirty pound test line run out.

Thus disguised as a fisherman, albeit a rather disinterested one, Austin cruised slowly past each of the three buoys. They were typical bell buoys, the type used to mark the narrow, deep water channels into harbors all over the world. They looked silly so far from land, and Austin estimated they must have three hundred yards of line under them; a hundred to reach bottom, and two hundred to allow for drift with the current. A buoy will not stay anchored unless the line departs the bottom at an angle; the greater the angle the greater the stability. Austin decided to have a look at the line.

He brought the boat behind one of the markers, cut the engine, and dove overboard. He swam quickly to the underside of the buoy. It was anchored with rope three quarter inch rope! If ever there was a temporary installation, that was one. He surfaced behind the buoy and inspected it at close range. At eight equidistant points around the main body of the marker, Austin could see

that someone had drilled holes and covered them with one-way glass circles, two inches in diameter each. Austin unscrewed one of the glass circles and found behind it a zoom lens attached to a conventional closed-circuit television camera. Three buoys to photograph the sub, triangulation to locate its exact position, telemetry to bring the details back to the computers and monitors in Findletter's control room. Austin replaced the glass filter.

He was just hauling himself aboard the boat when from out of nowhere came a scream of tortured gears. Austin spun his head toward the sky, instinctively looking for a projectile of some sort, but there was none. Then he followed the noise to his fishing reel, which was spinning so rapidly its bronze handle was merely a blur.

'Jesus Christ!' he shouted. 'That's got to be Moby Dick on there.'

He scrambled into the boat, plunked himself into the trolling chair, and leaned into the pole sharply, determined to stop the fish's run before it ran Austin out of line. After stripping more than three hundred yards of line from the reel, the fish turned, made for the surface, and with an explosion matching that of any grenade, a huge silver marlin burst the surface, throwing its bill from side to side, slashing out at an invisible enemy, and tail walking more than a hundred feet across the surface. An hour and a half later, Austin was able to gaff the fish and haul it aboard. He stared at it for several minutes of disbelief.

'Just like waiters, cops, and women,' he mused, 'when you need one, there's none around. When you don't want one, you can't beat 'em off with a stick. I'll be damned.'

Austin started the engine, made a wide circle and roared off at full throttle. It was three in the afternoon when he pulled into the dock at Nassau. Harry Donner was waiting.

'I got the stuff you requested,' he said. 'And Cyn is waiting at the chopper. What in God's name are you

going to do with that fish?'

'Have it weighed, of course,' Austin said, 'and have my picture taken with it. Then ... I don't know, maybe I'll mail it to Oscar.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The blue-and-white Ranger made good time on its final run from Nasssau to Paradise Cay. It was a glorious September afternoon, the temperature was comfortably in the low seventies, and nature had spread all its tropical glory before their eyes as if, Austin mused, to give them a last look.

'It's just four,' Donner said, consulting his watch. 'The sub is coming into the area in an hour. After dropping you, Cyn will land me on deck.'

'How did the captain take the news of your impending arrival?' Austin asked.

'I don't know. Not well, I imagine. And I'm not too keen on going in there, not knowing what I'm looking for.'

'Anything out of the ordinary.'

'Steve, what *isn't* out of the ordinary on that boat?'

'Chin up, Harry,' Austin smiled, 'I've got faith in you. And with any luck I'll get a radio message to Cyn, who will relay it to you on the ship.'

'Steve, I feel I've been patient,' Donner said. 'When you said you swam twenty-five miles to shore from the Russian's boat, I didn't ask questions. When you said you escaped from one of the best guarded arsenals in the world, I didn't flinch. When you said you played dead by

lying underwater until Koslov's plane went away, not a word did you hear from my mouth. But Steve, tell me one thing. I would like to know how you plan to send a radio message without a radio?'

'It's all in here,' Austin said, patting his rib cage.

'You're gonna need more than heart.'

'Trust me.'

'Steve, for God's sake –'

'Come on, Harry, you know I can't tell you. Ask Oscar for a level six clearance, and I promise you a little talk you'll never forget.'

'Okay, okay. So you don't have a radio, but you'll make a broadcast. Why make it on the twenty-one meter band? Of all the ridiculous frequencies –'

'Findletter's technicians are going to be monitoring everything from citizen's band to marine and aviation and U.S. Navy frequencies.'

'And they won't monitor twenty-one meters?'

'Never. That's the emission frequency of hydrogen. Half the universe sends out radio signals on the twenty-one-meter band; you know, hydrogen when ionized by the light of a star loses an electron and in so doing emits an electromagnetic wave –'

'All right, all right, you were an astronaut.'

'So with the sensitivity of the equipment in that con trol room, if they turned into twenty-one meters, they'd probably get their ears blown off by all the noise.'

'And we won't?'

'Not with the low range transmitter I'll be using, and the short distance. Remember, Cyn's only going to be a few thousand feet away.'

'Okay, Steve, this is your time at bat. Make sure you smack one.'

'I'll do my best, Harry,' Austin said, throwing open the chopper door and hurling himself into the air.

Austin hit the silk at five thousand feet and dropped half that distance before popping open the huge, sky-blue nylon chute. Not an ordinary parachute by any means,

this advanced model was a true airfoil; rectangular in shape, from edge-on it looked like an exaggeration of the cross-section of an airplane wing. It not only slowed Austin's rate of descent like a conventional chute, it was maneuverable in a forward direction. By shifting his weight and pulling selectively on the supporting ropes, he could achieve a horizontal airspeed of about ten knots. The same principle was at that time under test by the Air Force for use in low-speed, low-altitude aircraft, such as might be used to infiltrate enemy lines. With a small piston engine and a prop, Austin could have made twenty-five knots and gone wherever he liked. Under the circumstances, he was more than elated with the simple forward mobility.

The rushing wind made his blue flightsuit ripple, a feeling he liked. He was flying again, something he had not anticipated doing. When he first awoke after his crash, and Wells told him within six months he would be flying, Austin called him a bastard and refused to believe that a triple amputee would ever see anything more exciting than a wicker basket in some moldy veteran's hospital. Austin always felt that a flightsuit was the most comfortable clothing imaginable, at least for him, and it pleased him to wear it again. Beneath him, the lush green fields of the cemetery rose to meet him, and to one side, a sleek, black limousine drove down the ramp to the basement garage servicing the mausoleum and its underground arsenal. Austin touched down behind a stand of large trees, quickly folded the parachute, stashed it behind a gravestone, and wriggled out of his suit.

Austin ran to the side of the building and inched along it to the ramp. Through several small bushes, he could see the large steel doors closing over the limousine.

Once securely inside the garage, the limousine opened and Findletter stepped out. Behind him, Alexei Koslov and Katrina Volana exited, looking confused.

'I do not understand why it was necessary to return at

this point,' Koslov said. 'Certainly Undersecretary Volana did not have to make this journey. I have not yet had a reply from Moscow on the subject of the three additional Sawfly missiles and the American Polaris.'

'I did not expect that we would have to return, either,' Findletter said grimly, leading the way into the elevator and pressing the button for Sub-Basement C.

'And why the lack of secrecy?' Koslov asked. 'Yesterday you went to elaborate lengths to disguise from me the nearness of your arsenal to our own quarters. Today, there is no such secrecy. Why?'

'Yesterday I did not know you had an arrangement with the Americans,' Findletter said.

The elevator opened on the bottommost level, and Findletter led the way into the control room.

'All missions in the United States fall under my jurisdiction,' Katrina said, 'and I would know if there was an arrangement with the Americans. There is none.'

'If only you were as convincing as you are beautiful,' Findletter said. 'But let me tell you what has happened. And you help me decide what to do. Yesterday, your Mr Koslov and I embarked on a most secret excursion. No one knew of our adventure. We visited the most closely guarded sanctuary in all this world. And when our journey was complete, I received a most distressing message. Someone had been privy to our visit. A guard was killed on this level, as were three others up above, the victims of this unknown intruder. And who was he? We can't be sure, but I have an idea it was your American friend, Steve Austin.'

'Steve Austin is dead,' Koslov said. 'I told you that. I killed him myself.'

'Yes, you told me. And at what time did his death occur?'

'At 11:40 this morning.'

'You are certain?'

'Within five minutes.'

'I know. And you watched him lie underwater for eight

minutes without moving and without breathing apparatus, more than twice the time needed to kill any man.'

'It is impossible for him to be alive,' Koslov said.

'Yes, yes, yes. Quite impossible. Your lovely friend here killed him yesterday, and you killed him today. No man could remain alive under such circumstances. So the only possible explanation is that you are lying. The question,' Findletter said, 'is why?'

'We are not lying,' Koslov said stiffly.

'I am getting tired of this game,' Findletter snapped. 'My dear Mr Koslov, at precisely 12:47 this afternoon your dead friend was discovered snooping around one of my telemetry sensors located at the edge of Grand Bahamas Bank. That is, you recall, more than an hour after you killed him.

Koslov looked stunned.

'I will show you,' Findletter said. 'Run the tape.'

Koslov and Katrina Volana watched in awe as one of the monitors lit up with a brilliant marine vista seen from an angle extremely close to the water. In the middle of it, standing in a fishing boat, was Steve Austin.

'Here you have Mr Austin posing as a fisherman,' Findletter said. 'If you note the digital readout at the bottom of the screen, you will see the correct time down to a tenth of a second. The other numbers along the bottom are other telemetry information which need not concern you.'

The two Russians watched as Austin dove from the boat, swam underwater for a time, then surfaced right in front of the camera.

'Here you see he had discovered the telemetry equipment,' Findletter said, 'and here he is inspecting it. He put it back together when he was finished. Most thoughtful of him, if I do say so, and a good deal less thoughtful than you. Now, Mr Koslov, what sort of deal have you made with the Americans?'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Outside the huge mausoleum, Austin moved quickly down the ramp to the closed steel doors. Through a window in one of them, he watched the limousine stop, saw its passengers get into the elevator with Findletter, and watched as they descended to the arsenal. Austin scanned the door. It was heavy, but not immovable. He was about to attempt it, when there was a voice.

'What are you doing?' a guard yelled. 'How'd you get here?'

Austin wheeled to find himself facing a grim-faced guard wearing a white security uniform and holding a rifle.

'I just dropped in,' he said. 'I'd like to talk to the man in charge.'

'Mountain Shadows is under new management ... and undergoing repairs. We're temporarily closed.'

'I see,' Austin said, trying hard to look sincere. 'Well, this is kind of an emergency ... Say, I wonder if you'd mind not pointing that thing directly at me?'

Slowly, innocently, Austin extended his bionic hand and took the muzzle between his thumb and forefinger. Deliberately, so as to avoid alarming the guard, he pushed the rifle so that it was pointing to one side. In so doing, he pinched the muzzle into a tight oval from

which no bullet could emerge.

Unabashed, the guard moved away several paces and pointed the gun back at Austin.

'We get a lot of vandals around here,' he said. 'My orders are to keep everybody off the property.'

'I understand that,' Austin said, ignoring the guard's orders and turning toward the door, 'but if there's someone inside I could talk to . . .'

Austin knocked on the door.

'I said we're closed,' the guard ordered. 'Now either you get out of here, or . . .'

The huge doors slid open, and Austin found himself facing a large and nasty looking guard, quite obviously the chief security man in Findletter's organization.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Just the man I was looking for,' Austin said cheerily, brushing by the fellow and striding into the basement. In the huge, low-ceilinged area were several hearses and an assortment of caskets. Aside from that, the room was easily as drab as any of the halls above.

'What do you want?' the man barked.

'What do I want? Why, I want to inspect your selection of caskets.'

Austin smiled and gave the security man a short once-over.

'I'm going to be needing one right away,' he said.

Austin walked to a smart-looking, wooden casket, varnished mahogany with white vinyl trim and interior.

'This will do just fine,' he said.

'I don't think you're interested in caskets,' the burly man said.

'Oh, but I am.' Austin grabbed the man and yanked him off balance. He delivered a stunning right cross which snapped the man's head back, followed by a bionic shot to the solar plexus which lifted the man entirely off his feet. Austin then deposited him in the casket as easily as one drops a dirty towel into the hamper. He slammed the lid shut and turned to the other guard.

'Get back!' the man yelled, pointing the rifle directly at Austin's heart.

'I'd advise you not to fire that,' Austin said, taking two deliberately provocative steps forward.

The guard pulled the trigger, and the rifle exploded with a deafening roar and flash of light, throwing the man off his feet and leaving him sprawling in the midst of an assortment of cans and boxes.

'I warned him,' Austin shrugged, walking toward the elevator. He rode the elevator down to Sub-Basement C, but this time when the doors opened there was no guard with whom to deal He started down the corridor, when he suddenly heard voices and ducked inside the first available door, a large one with an airtight seal and a wheel-locking control like those in submarines.

The room was apparently a laboratory such as might be used in biological research. In the middle was a large workbench, part of it covered with a ceiling high stack of laboratory animals in wire cages. Another such stack ran from the floor to the ceiling in another part of the room. Around the walls were the usual monitors.

Austin ducked behind the workbench when Findletter entered the room followed by Koslov and Katrina Volana. Two armed guards stood in the doorway. Findletter punched a button on an intercom. 'Channel the telemetry in here,' he said. Instantly, the monitors on the wall lit up with a picture of a submarine – distant, and not too clear, but clearly a submarine.

'You see on these monitors,' Findletter said, 'a United States Poseidon submarine . . . Eight thousand three hundred tons, four hundred fifty feet long, a crew of one hundred fifty men, and sixteen long-range Poseidon missiles. To refresh your memory, the Poseidon C-3 missile is quite an improvement on the Polaris. It has double the payload and twice the accuracy of the old Polaris A-3. The Poseidon carries a Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicle, which as you know the Americans, who love to abbreviate things, call MIRV.

Each missile contains between ten and fourteen separate thermonuclear explosive warheads, each guided to its own target, along with a number of decoy warheads the purpose of which is to throw off enemy defenses. I don't know precisely how many warheads, or precisely how many decoys,' Findletter said, 'but I soon shall. This submarine is now arriving in our waters. Very soon she will be the first of many to join my fleet.'

'You are insane,' Katrina said. 'Who would buy a pirated submarine from you?'

'Apparently just about everyone. I made a calculated error before in offering only missiles for sale. It was rather like peddling bullets from an odd-caliber weapon without delivering the appropriate weapon as well. You might fire the shells with some effort, but never with their intended efficiency.'

'That's why you were so willing to sell the stolen missiles back to us,' Koslov said.

'Yes, my preferred customers decided to wait for the deluxe package. Can you imagine how attractive an item that is to any small country? Take any of the oil-rich Arab countries, for example. There'd no longer be a need to train, equip, and man a land army, navy, or air force. With one Poseidon submarine and her sixteen missiles, such a country could flatten any two of her enemies with enough firepower left over to incinerate a third. It would be the Six-Minute War.'

'Even you can't capture an armed nuclear submarine,' Koslov said. 'It is an impossibility.'

'To the contrary. The only thing which prevented me from doing so with your country's submarine was an unfortunate accident. Apparently the craft had some sort of automatic destruct mechanism on board which sank it and did irreparable damage to the craft and most of her missiles. I was lucky to get away with four Sawfly missiles, the ones you saw.'

'So it was you who sank our submarine.'

'I assure you I never intended to *sink* it,' Findletter

said. 'I wanted to have it whole. However, you are quite right. There *is* no way to *attack* a nuclear submarine. You couldn't get close enough. Even a missile from out of nowhere would give her radar enough warning for her to radio her peril to Washington.'

Findletter lifted a black box from the research bench.

'So she must be *attacked from within,*' he said. 'And this must be done in less time than it takes a wireless operator to trigger a pre-taped distress signal.'

Findletter lifted a crystal goblet from a cabinet and placed it on the research table, coming so close as he did so to Austin that the American had to squat near the floor to avoid detection.

'But that same line of communication that protects the nuclear fleet,' Findletter said, 'also can be turned against her. Her channels are always open to receive a "go order in case of war." And that is her weakness. She is always receiving signals.'

Findletter walked across the room, holding the black box in one hand.

'If this goblet were aboard a submarine five hundred miles away, a submarine that was always receiving radio signals, one could, by merely transmitting the appropriate signal . . .'

Findletter pressed a button on the box. An electronic tone of high pitch began, and rose in volume. Just before the sound became unbearable, the goblet shattered.

'. . . shatter the glass into a million pieces. That wouldn't exactly devastate a nuclear submarine,' Findletter went on, 'but by using that principle, we might manage to get something slightly more deadly aboard.'

Findletter returned to the cabinet from which he had extracted the goblet. From it he took an aerosol can and displayed it proudly.

'Absolutely essential to the well being of one-hundred and fifty men cramped together in a small cylindrical tube for months on end: a generous supply of aerosol canisters containing everything from room fresheners to

shaving cream and deodorant. The Americans are so very cooperative. They have people they call "sub contractors." One such sub-contractor handles all the . . . shall we say . . . household goods which go into the United States submarine fleet. I own that firm. It is one of my more ordinary enterprises, along with this cemetery. Diversification is necessary in today's business, but of course you wouldn't know about that. Anyway, we have managed to place on board the Poseidon a generous supply of these aerosol canisters which not only do the job for which they were intended . . .'

Findletter pressed the button on the can and released a small bulb of shaving cream onto his finger, which he then shook off.

'. . . but additionally are designed to emit a special vapor when triggered by a radio burst. Gentlemen, if you will prepare the demonstration . . .'

The two guards pulled a glass cage from the wall and wheeled it up in front of Findletter. Then one of them handed two gas masks to Findletter, and the two of them left the room, closing the airtight door and sealing it after them.

'This container contains what is known as G14 nerve gas. It is colorless, odorless, and painless. Yet death occurs within thirty seconds from time of exposure.'

Behind the bench, Austin began to cast about for a means of escape. The situation he knew was coming up would have to be ended in a hurry.

'As you can see, there are only two masks. Would you please put one of them on, Miss Volana?'

The Russian woman did so.

'When the gas takes effect aboard the submarine,' Findletter said, 'all will die, and my men, who now are in the area in the guise of a fishing party . . . much as your partner, Mr Austin was when he discovered my sensors . . . my men will don similar masks, board the ship, and take her. The masks will protect them, and this one will protect you, Miss Volana. You have nothing to fear. Un-

fortunately, I cannot say the same for Mr Koslov. You, sir, I will ask you again. What arrangements have you made with the Americans? How did they breach our complex?'

'And I have told you,' Koslov replied. 'We made no arrangement. None.'

Findletter slipped the remaining mask over his head, hefted the aerosol container, and deposited it next to a cage containing a white rat.

'Very well,' he said, 'if you'll keep your eyes on the rat, we'll begin.'

Findletter touched a button on the black box, and the familiar, piercing tone began to ring out.

'This audible tone is just for show,' Findletter said. 'It is the radio signal that you do not hear which will cause the gas to be released. Watch, Mr Koslov, and imagine, if you will, a quantity of these aerosol canisters throughout a submarine. At precisely the right moment, a signal is dispatched and ... if you are an average man, you will be able to hold your breath perhaps two minutes. This rat will last but thirty seconds.'

Austin sucked in a great gulp of breath. The rat began to quiver, then faltered, fell onto its side, and was still.

'You have one minute or less to live, Mr Kaslov.'

Suddenly, Katrina ripped off her mask. 'Stop it!' she yelled. 'He is telling the truth. Here, Alexei,' she said, handing him the mask, 'put it on!'

'No, Katrina,' Koslov said quietly.

He pushed the mask back onto the woman's face.

'Just like you were telling the truth about your Mr Austin,' Findletter yelled. 'You aren't conspiring against me! He swam 25 miles. He rested underwater for eight minutes after taking a grenade blast! His ghost discovered my sensors! Very well, let that lie die on your lips ... both of you!'

Findletter wrested the mask from Katrina, hurled it across the room, then stepped back to watch.

Unable to wait any longer, Austin lunged from behind the workbench and delivered a mighty blow, sending

Findletter crashing into the floor-to-ceiling rack of test animals, which then came crashing down around him. As the two Russians watched in amazement, Austin dashed across the floor and hit the wall with his left shoulder. The wall burst outward into the hall, filling the corridor with debris and knocking off their feet the two guards standing outside the laboratory. Austin grabbed the two Russians by the hands, pulled them through the hole, and began to run with them down the corridor.

Findletter burst through the hole after them, shouting to the two guards. One of the men staggered unsteadily to his feet, pieces of powdered plaster and brick cascading from his shoulders. He raised his rifle and began to fire. Bullets raked the floor, walls, and ceiling all around the fleeing trio, when suddenly there was a gasp and Koslov went down, struck in the back.

'Wait!' Austin yelled, and he went back for the Russian. The sound of a claxon warning echoed up and down the corridor. Both guards were on their feet and preparing to fire the death shots for Austin and Katrina when suddenly they began to falter, stumble, and fall, overcome by the nerve gas leaking from the hole Austin had punched in their laboratory.

'So, my friend, we work together after all,' Koslov gasped.

'Hang on,' Austin said, 'we'll get you out of here.'

'No ... there isn't time ... you must stop him. He will murder those men and many more.'

'Don't talk, Alexei,' Katrina said, 'we will find a way.'

Guards, alerted by the claxon, poured into the corridor.

'He's right,' Austin said, 'there isn't time.'

She looked down at Koslov to see her comrade's brown eyes staring sightlessly into space.

Austin grabbed her hand and ran off toward the elevator. He pressed the button for the roof, and the doors slipped shut as bullet holes ripped through them.

'I've done this before,' Austin said. 'Maybe it will work again.'

'How did you do that to the wall?' she asked.

'Trade secret. Maybe someday . . .'

The elevator moved past the second and first sub-basements. Austin reached up, pushed up the escape panel, and pulled himself through it. Then, kneeling on the roof of the car, he pulled her after him and replaced the panel. The elevator came to a stop on the fifth floor.

'I knew it would do that,' Austin said.

He listened for a moment, but heard nothing.

'No guard this time? Well, maybe Findletter's running out of hired hands. Close your eyes.'

'What?'

'Close your eyes. There's something I can't let you see.'

The girl shrugged and obeyed. Austin hiked up his pants leg, reached into the hidden compartment, and withdrew a small microphone. The mike was connected to a miniature wire recorder powered with two mercury cell batteries. He could tape a ten minute message, withdraw the recorder and its attached radio transmitter, and leave it hidden, to repeat its message until received. He could, if he wished, burst transmit the entire ten minutes in fifteen seconds, a technique long in use in satellite telemetry. He had used the latter technique to send home information about the Russian's underwater submarine base in South America some time back.

This time he needed only a simple radio. He cupped the microphone to his lips.

'Austin to Chase One . . .'

The elevator shaft rang with the sound of crackling static.

'Austin to Chase One . . .'

'Chase One to Austin. What have you got, Steve?'

'Get this to Harry. Get it right. I haven't time to repeat. Message is as follows: RADIO DASH ACTIVATED NERVE GAS LOCATED IN COMMON AEROSOL CANS I.E. ROOM FRESHNER. ISOLATE

OR DUMP OVERBOARD. GAS WORKS INHALATION ONLY. POSSIBLE BOARDING PARTIES ONE OR MORE PARTY FISHING BOATS. GOOD LUCK, AUSTIN.

'Got it, Cyn?'

'Got it. I'll be waiting.'

Austin folded the microphone back into the compartment and straightened his pants leg.

'You can look now.'

'I don't suppose it'll do me any good to ask –'

'No good at all.'

'Who am I to argue? The elevator is moving.'

'It seems to be continuing up to the roof,' Austin said. 'Maybe . . .'

'Maybe we'll get lucky.'

The elevator climbed to the roof in a matter of twenty seconds and came to a stop. Austin and the girl climbed down to the floor of the machinery housing. Austin reached for the door to the roof.

'Here goes nothing,' he said.

He opened the door and was greeted by the barrels of four machine guns. Without a word, they allowed themselves to be ushered back into the elevator. Watching them very closely, the four guards took them back to the arsenal.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Commander Charles Dawson was justifiably proud of his new command. After years of piloting a Polaris submarine, the finest of its time, he had been selected over many other good men to command the most modern warship ever added to the underwater fleet. After months of reading, training, and simulations, he now had the real thing under his feet, and it felt good to be her captain.

The U.S.N.S. *Lafayette* had performed magnificently steaming down the Gulf Steam from Charleston for its deep sea tests. Making better than thirty knots on the surface, the *Lafayette* had changed course east near Bimini, and now would cruise through the shoal waters of the Bahamas, with the permission of the Bahamian government, to test its depth ranging gear while en route to deeper waters. It was a wonderful first day, and now something had happened which promised to spoil it. Dawson stood on the coning tower while a blue and white civilian helicopter landed an American intelligence officer on board. Something about a threat to the ship had been uncovered. Dawson had been ordered to hear the man out and, if the threat was real, to take whatever action was appropriate.

Harry Donner ran up the afterdeck of the vessel, step-

ping gingerly over the huge, circular plates which masked the Poseidon missile silos. Two seamen helped him up a short metal ladder to the bridge.

'Mr Donner,' Dawson said, 'I'm Commander Dawson. Welcome aboard the *Lafayette*. What can I do for you?'

'Can we talk below?' Donner asked.

'Sure thing. May I see your clearance?'

Donner showed it to him.

'Very well. Please follow me.'

Dawson led Harry Donner through the marvel of tunnels, pipes, and electronic gear which filled the submarine, his initial suspicion calmed somewhat when he noticed that Donner was too somber to sightsee or ask questions. They sat over a table in the captain's quarters.

'Coffee, Mr Donner?'

'There may not be time,' Donner said. 'Now, I expect you might find some of this hard to believe –'

'Mr Donner, you sit surrounded by something an old sailor like me never dreamed was possible, and I think you can expect me to appreciate the fantastic.'

'Yes, of course. Well, one of our operatives on Paradise Cay, near here, has uncovered what might be an attempt upon the *Lafayette*.'

'An attempt?'

'I don't know how this will happen, nor when. Our operative believes it will be within the next hour.'

'Our equipment detects no ships or planes which might endanger us.' Dawson said. 'No hostile action of any kind.'

'Like I said, I don't know *how*. Have you heard of a man named Arlen Findletter?'

'No.'

'He is an international dealer in stolen arms. He has offered for sale to the highest bidder four Russian Sawfly missiles and one of our Polaris missiles.'

'You can verify this?'

'We have. Our operative got the serial number of the Polaris, and it checked out. Findletter is on the level.

And we know he claims he'll soon be able to deliver an entire Poseidon submarine. That's you.'

'Mr Donner, there is no way –'

'I told you it was fantastic, Commander, but believe me, I'm very serious about this. If I wanted to make an ass of myself, I would do it some other way. In the past week we have chased this man Findletter all the way from Egypt to –'

'Egypt?' Dawson said curiously.

'Alexandria,' Donner said.

Suddenly, Dawson's eyes widened, and he stared very intently at Donner.

'Mr Donner, what is the name of your operative?'

'How is that important?'

'Is it Austin?'

'Yes,' said Donner, quite taken aback. 'How could you –?'

'Mr Donner, I am prepared to believe whatever you tell me. Now, what does Steve Austin want me to do?'

'Message, sir,' a voice at the door said.

'Come in.'

'Priority message for Mr Donner from Colonel Austin.'

Donner took the scrap of paper and read it aloud. Ashen, Dawson picked up two objects. In his left hand was a can of room freshener. In his right, a microphone. He pressed the button on the microphone.

'This is the captain speaking,' he said. 'This is an emergency. Repeat, this is an emergency. This is not a test, nor is it a joke. All personnel will immediately open all topside hatches and do precisely as I order. We have information that an enemy has planted containers of nerve gas in all aerosol canisters in the ship. Repeat, all aerosol canisters. Shaving cream, room freshener, everything. I want it overboard as fast as possible. Seal off watertight doors on ship's stores. Small weapons crew on deck, fore and aft. Come to course zero six zero, full speed ahead.'

Dawson set down the microphone and went to the door. He was still holding the aerosol can.

'Come on, Mr Donner,' he said, 'Let's throw this damned thing overboard.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Austin and the girl were taken to a detention room down the hall from the control center, where the monitors still flashed pictures of the giant submarine, ever clearer as the sub approached.

They were secured to tables, Austin with heavy steel shackles, the girl with ropes. His composure regained, Findletter stared at them with curiosity.

'You may as well give up your plans,' Katrina said. 'Our governments will be working together now. They will be coming here to exterminate you and your hoodlums.'

'I think not,' Findletter said. 'If that were the case, I believe Mr Austin would have brought help with him. You know, Austin, I have been watching you with fascination. Your ability to swim extraordinary distances and speeds, knock down walls made of solid concrete, survive on a minimum of oxygen for an inordinate length of time, all these things are most impressive.'

'Thanks,' Austin said dryly.

'And your deductive abilities. The way you found my telemetry sensors, and not only that, but you caught a fish. A marlin, I believe.'

'A silver marlin. So I was noticed.'

'You were. And it was beautiful. How much did it weigh?'

'One eight-seven.'

'Very nice, very nice. We have here a man who not only can break down walls, he can use an artificial metal lure to catch a species of fish that only takes live bait. Mr Austin, I don't know *what you are*, but on the basis of what I've seen, you have great commercial possibilities. When this operation is over, I intend to investigate making you the newest entry in my catalogue.'

Findletter motioned to a guard, who moved to Austin's left side with a hypodermic needle.

'In the meantime, this will sedate you. With your apparent strength, you might have notions about escaping.'

'Mind giving it to me in my right arm?' Austin said. 'I don't want to wreck my tennis serve.'

Findletter eyed Austin suspiciously.

'His left arm,' he said. The guard administered the medicine, which dissipated in Austin's bionic arm.

'That's going to piss Rudy off,' Austin thought.

'If you do manage to stay awake,' Findletter said, 'you can watch the capture of the Poseidon on the monitor. It will reach the shallow waters in three minutes.'

'And then,' Austin asked, 'how will the signal be sent?'

'By radio from here. My men were tending to the antenna at the time you tried to escape onto the roof.'

'A programmed signal, no doubt,' Austin said.

'Quite right. Of course you know electronics well. It is a computer-programmed signal which cannot be countermanded after the two-minute-thirty mark, which I see we have just passed. Well, nothing to be done about it now.'

'Action on the sub, sir,' a voice cracked from a wall speaker.

Findletter wheeled to stare at the screen. Men were running onto the deck, setting up deck guns, throwing things overboard.

'It looks like they're throwing the canisters over, sir,' the voice said.

'I see that!' Findletter said sharply, then calmed. 'So, they found out. There are many things I don't understand, but soon shall. Anyway, this futile effort won't prevent the capture of the vessel. There are hundreds of those cans on board. They can't possibly dump them all in . . .' He consulted his watch. '. . . two minutes. And just to make sure they don't . . .'

Findletter spoke into the intercom. 'Order the boarding parties to move in. Shoot those men off the deck.'

'Yes, sir,' the voice crackled. Almost as it did, the monitor went blank for several seconds, then snapped back on, this time showing the *Lafayette* from a different angle.

'They're shooting at the buoys,' the voice said. 'They knocked out one of them.'

Findletter glared at Austin, then stalked from the room, taking the guard and slamming the door behind him.

'One minute thirty and counting,' the voice from the wall speaker announced.

'You must fight it, Steve,' Katrina yelled. 'Don't go to sleep!'

Austin concentrated all his energy on the steel shackle holding his left wrist.

'You must do something! He's going to kill all those men! Steve, try to stay awake!'

'Katrina,' Austin said, 'would you stop talking?'

'I have to keep talking. I have to help you fight the effects of the –'

The woman's words were cut short by the snapping of steel. When she looked at Austin's left wrist, she found it was freed, the steel twisted like a pretzel. Austin sat up and tore the shackle from his right wrist, then snapped the metal binding his feet.

'In Russia,' she said reverently, 'they say American men are soft.'

'We rise to the occasion.'

'Zero minus one minute and counting . . .'

'We've got to keep him from transmitting that signal,' Austin said. 'He's right. They can't possibly get all the canisters out of that sub in time.'

Austin walked to the door and pulled the pins from both top and bottom hinges. Then he stepped to one side, gave the door a slight flick, and let it fall straight back into the room. Before the guard could turn around, Austin grabbed him by the collar, pulled him straight back, and delivered a bionic punch that sent the man crashing into the opposite wall, thence to slip to the floor.

'Fifty seconds and counting . . .'

Austin grabbed the girl by the hand and pulled her from the room. Findletter was seated at the center console in the control room, watching the monitors as they displayed the struggle taking place aboard the *Lafayette*. As Austin peered through the door at him, the monitors again went black, then again flickered on, this last time with a distant and blurry image.

'One more sensor knocked out,' a technician said, but Findletter was quiet.

'Forty seconds and counting . . .'

Austin and the girl ran down the hall until they came to the short branch corridor.

'In here,' Austin commanded, and she followed. Austin found the door to the generator room. It was locked. He leaned back, and gave it a vicious kick. The door sprang open and smashed with a roar into the wall. Austin yanked the girl into the room with him.

'Thirty seconds and counting . . .'

Harry Donner had never seen anything like it in his life. 'I thought this only happened in old movies,' he said.

'It hasn't happened to me in almost thirty years,' Dawson said as he watched his men battle the two boarding parties Findletter had ordered in to sweep the decks.

Both fore and aft of the conning tower, a dozen men with machine guns poured shells into the two fishing boats, both of them forty to fifty feet in length and carry

ing ten to twenty men apiece. In addition, each of the boats had a 30mm cannon mounted on the stern, in a spot where it was convenient to have it hidden under a dummy fishing throne.

It was a short but spectacular fight. The 30mm's could not come within the range of the sub's twin 50mm's. Donner watched in awe as the forward 50mm connected with a stunning amidships hit on one of the boats, sending wood and the bodies of men flying into the air, to be followed by an explosion and a spilling of flaming gas across the surface of the water. At that, the second boat turned tail, but got no more than forty yards when it, too, suffered a hit, a direct hit on the gas tanks. Donner could not see what happened to the boat. He couldn't see anything but fire and smoke.

'How are we coming with those canisters?' Dawson shouted.

'Can't tell, sir,' an officer replied. 'We've got a lot of them, but there's a hell of a lot more in there. They're all over the place.'

'Can you dive?' Donner asked. 'Won't water block the radio transmission?'

'It won't help. Radio waves can travel under water. None too well, but they can do it. And at this close range to the antenna –'

'I see.'

'Got the last buoy, sir,' a voice called.

'Damn!' Findletter swore as the monitors went blank and stayed that way.

'*Ten seconds and counting . . .*'

'So we can't see it,' Findletter said. 'We've still got the ship. There's no way they can stop it now. Even if only half the canisters go off, that still will kill every man aboard.'

'*Five, four . . .*'

Austin scanned the generator room and saw that the splice he had ripped out which incapacitated the emer-

gency generator had gone unrepaired. He yanked open the main control box and grabbed the heavy, fist-sized main power cable in his left hand.

'Three . . .'

'We're too late!' Katrina yelled.

'Two . . .'

Austin yanked the cable and it tore from its fittings with a blinding flash of electrical fire. Smoke poured from the panel and quickly filled the room. Austin grabbed Katrina by the hand and led her into the corridor. It was totally black. Men could be heard groping around, swearing in the darkness.

Inside the control room, Findletter sat glued to his seat, gripping the armrests so hard his knuckles were white.

'Auxiliary power!' he yelled.

'Switching . . .'

'Where the hell is auxiliary power?'

'It's out, sir. The whole power circuit is gone.'

Only one word came to Findletter's lips. 'Austin,' he said quietly. He sat for a moment, then rose screaming. 'Get men out into that hall! Get the battery lights on! I want that man!'

'Steve . . . I can't see a thing,' Katrina whispered.

'Take my hand,' he said, and began to lead her down the halt. To him, the hall was quite clear, bathed in a soft, green light.

'How can you see where you're going?'

'I eat a lot of carrots. Now, come on . . .'

Men were groping their way along the walls, and Findletter's voice swearing at them was quite clear. Suddenly, emergency lights placed at strategic places along the wall came to life.

'Batteries,' Austin muttered.

'There they are! Get them!'

Shots rang out as Austin and the girl ran at full speed down the hall.

'We'll never make the elevator,' Katrina cried.

'In here . . .'

Austin pulled the girl into the missile room and pressed the 'Close' button. The heavy doors slammed shut and, as they did, Austin gave the door a mighty kick, knocking it off its track and warping it so as to make it virtually un-openable.

'The power is back on, they'll still be able to release the nerve gas,' the girl said.

'Those are just emergency lights, which work on storage batteries and turn on and off by a main switch. Power, yes, but I can safely say that that transmitter has sung its last song.'

Katrina looked around the incredible room, which was made even more sinister looking by the strange light of the battery lamps. The cavern rang with the sound of men shouting, and other men pounding on the door, trying to slide it open.

'There's no other way out, is there?' she asked.

Austin pointed to a ventilator grill on the wall.

'Get something to stand on and see if you can get that open,' he commanded. Katrina searched the perimeter of the cavern and finally found a small stepladder used in the construction of the eighth silo, the one Findletter no doubt intended as a repository for a Poseidon missile to show customers. She dragged the ladder to a spot under the ventilator grill and climbed upon it.

Austin was at the console. He pressed button number seven, and the Polaris missile rolled noisily from its silo.

'Want to see an American missile?' Austin called.

'I'm busy!' she yelled. 'Don't bother me.'

'Some spy.'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing.'

Austin rushed into the silo and ripped off a plate by the side of the door. Inside was a tangle of wires which controlled both the mechanism which rolled out the missile and the sliding door. Austin traced the wires and selected two of them, the ones which controlled the door.

He yanked them free of their fastenings and pulled a long length of them from the electrical housing. He touched the ends together, and a spark shot from one to the other. He dropped the wires and ran to the console. Outside the door, men were using crowbars in an attempt to spring the door, while others were packing plastic explosives around the perimeter.

Austin pressed the button to close, but the silo doors did not respond.

'Perfect,' he said.

He ran back to the silo. This time when he touched the wires together, there was no arc.

He found a panel on the side of the missile. The lettering on it read 'Lockheed Polaris, E-type,' plus some coded information. The plate was half-open, apparently because Findlatter's technicians had looked to see how the thing ticked.

Austin searched inside the missile for the contacts he wanted. The basics of the guidance, propulsion, and arming systems were very familiar to him. The variations on this particular model were not so great as to throw him off. He took the two wires and attached them to two points inside the missile, the points where the computer mechanism fed the command to fire into the propulsion, guidance, and arming systems. Then he closed the plate, pushed the missile back into its silo, and pulled the door shut.

'How you doing?' he called to Katrina, who had completely disappeared into the ventilating shaft.

'Not bad.'

'Is there a way out?'

'There's a large vertical shaft. I can see light through a grating at the top of it. There's a kind of stairway.'

'Up you go,' he shouted, 'fast as you can.'

Austin grabbed the stepladder and tossed it back into the unfinished eighth silo. Then he jumped up, grabbed hold of the ventilator shaft, and pulled himself inside, closing the grate after him.

Katrina was several steps up the ladder.

'This is frightening,' she said. 'Maybe we should have taken our chances with Findletter.'

'I guarantee our relationship was heading for a blow up,' Austin said.

The cavern roared as plastic explosives ignited, blowing the door inward. Smoke filled the gigantic room, and men with automatic rifles poured inside.

'We have all the time in the world, gentlemen,' Findletter said. 'There is no other way out.'

Findletter walked into the room and examined it slowly. Suddenly he fixed his attention on the first silo door. He smiled broadly, then walked to the console. Without needing a cue, two guards moved to either side of the silo and shouldered their weapons, prepared to fire into the silo once the doors were opened.

Findletter pressed button one and the door began its slow trek open. The guards and Findletter stood apprehensively, but there was nothing inside. The guards rushed in and emerged a few seconds later shrugging. Findletter swore quietly and pressed button two.

'I'm exhausted,' Katrina said, 'and we don't even know where this comes out.'

'I smell salt water, love,' Austin said 'Now move.'

Inside the arsenal, Findletter returned missile two to its silo and pressed the button for missile three.

'We're getting there,' Katrina gasped. 'A few rungs more.'

'Keep moving.'

His nerves frayed, Findletter returned missile three to its silo and opened silo four. There was nothing inside and this time the man swore loudly. The guards stared at him, then moved to the next door. Findletter pressed button five.

Austin climbed past the girl and pushed the grating open. It was not even anchored, but sat on a foundation, rather like a manhole cover. He pushed Katrina ahead of him, then hauled himself out into the air. It was beauti-

ful, just the way it was when he left it. A few white clouds drifted lazily across the sky.

'Let's rest awhile,' the girl said.

'If you sit down,' Austin said tersely, 'I guarantee you'll never get up again in this lifetime. Now get on my back.'

'You can't,' she protested. 'You have to be almost as tired as I.'

Not wishing to argue, Austin tossed her over his shoulder and began to run. His stride increased with his speed, and once again he had a mental image of the digital readout in Rudy Wells's lab.

The unmistakable sound of a chopper was overhead. Austin stopped running and reached for a pontoon as it hovered over the ground. Cynthia Holland pushed the door open, and Austin and the Russian woman hopped inside.

'Good work!' Cynthia shouted.

'Forget that,' he barked. 'Let's get the hell out of here. That arsenal is about to go up! All possible speed out to sea!'

'Jesus,' Cynthia whispered as she whipped the Ranger into the air and off on a straight line. Within a few seconds they were making 130 mph over the open sea.

'Distance, love, more distance,' Austin yelled.

'What do you mean "go up"?' Katrina asked.

'What's the Russian word for Armageddon?'

'I see,' she said grimly.

Austin picked up the radio mike and switched the universal transmitter onto the aviation emergency band.

'May Day, May Day! Emergency notification to all planes in the vicinity of Paradise Cay! Possible nuclear detonation is imminent at that location! I repeat, possible nuclear detonation! All aircraft keep clear!'

'May Day was not the right thing to say,' Cynthia said.

'Go ahead, split hairs!'

Austin switched frequencies to a U.S. Navy band.

'Chase One to *Lafayette*, do you read?'

'Roger, Chase One, this is *Lafayette*.'

'*Lafayette*, what is your situation?'

'Stable, Chase One. We're picking up the pieces. Is the emergency over from your end?'

'In a manner of speaking. *Lafayette*, get this message to your skipper and to Mr Donner. Imminent nuclear detonation on Paradise Cay. Need I repeat that?'

'No, thank you, Chase One. What is your situation in regard to that explosion?'

'Five miles out and running like hell,' Austin said.

'Seven,' Cynthia yelled.

'Good girl. Keep her low and moving.'

Arlen Findletter pressed the 'Close' button for silo six with a mixture of frustration and anger. He stared at the final silo, number seven, and his lips curled into a smile.

'Of course,' he said, 'the American astronaut, the American missile.' He motioned the guards to get ready, and he pressed the button. Suddenly the cavern erupted with a roar like a dozen thunderclaps. Findletter clasped his hands over his ears and stepped back in horror as the door of the silo blew open, throwing the guards aside like bowling pins. A brilliant white light filled the room, and from the center of it Findletter saw the red white-and-blue tip of a Polaris missile. He stepped backwards until he was against the wall and could go no further. The missile was almost upon him. He hid his eyes.

'Ten miles!' Cynthia yelled.

'Your submarine, it's diving,' Katrina called.

Then the view of the blue sky was wiped out by a blinding white light that bathed both sea and sky for a matter of half a minute. Behind them, Paradise Cay seemed to disappear beneath a cloud of boiling fire and smoke which mushroomed up to the sky, before long towering over clouds, almost touching the heavens. Then the chopper was buffeted by a shock wave that tore them off course, hurled them up, then down again, and finally subsided.

Cynthia turned the chopper so it faced in the direction

of Paradise Cay, and all three stared in awe for several minutes. The entire center of the island was gone, replaced by a crater a thousand feet wide and a third that distance deep. The crater was deadly now, and would remain so for some time to come. But years would heal it, water would fill it, and some day fish would swim in it. Austin stared at the cloud.

'That's for a princess named Tamara and a friend named Alexei,' he said.

Katrina looked at him admiringly.

'I think maybe I understand better now what they mean when they say that American men are soft.'

'Like I said, we rise to the occasion.'

Austin picked up the mike. 'Chase One to *Lafayette*.' The submarine was broaching the sea, sliding easily to the surface.

'*Lafayette* to Chase One. Are you okay?'

'Yes, thank you. Request permission to land on afterdeck to pick up Harry Donner.'

After a minute's wait, permission was granted, and Cynthia set the Ranger down easily on the deck of the ship. The three of them hopped from the craft and walked to the conning tower.

Seamen and officers poured down the ladder, followed by the skipper.

'Colonel Austin,' he said, 'I seem to be making a career out of welcoming you aboard. Come on up.'

Austin mounted the ladder and greeted both Donner and Dawson. The two women followed, and appropriate introductions were made.

'My men will secure your chopper,' Dawson said. 'Let's go below for coffee.'

'I'm afraid not,' Austin said.

'Well, then, I do have concealed in my locker a bottle of Wild Turkey. Colonel, I'm sure you –'

'It's not me, sir,' Austin said. 'It's Miss Volana. She can't go below.'

'Oh,' Dawson said. 'Not claustrophobic, I hope?'

She smiled and shook her head.

'You see, Commander, Miss Volana is the Undersecretary for . . . for . . .'

'. . . for Special External Security,' she said.

'What's that?' Dawson asked, confused.

'She's a Russian agent,' Donner said flatly.

'But a very nice one,' Austin added.

'I see,' Dawson said. 'Well, I get your point. Perhaps some other time.'

'Certainly, Commander,' she said with a laugh.

'I am sorry I can't offer you my hospitality, but I will offer my thanks.'

She shrugged. 'We all work more or less in the same direction,' she said, and the four of them walked to the helicopter.

'Hey, Donner!' Dawson called.

'Every morning when I can't shave I'll think of you.'

A minute later they were in the chopper and circling over the submarine.

'Want to fly?' Cynthia asked Steve Austin.

'No, thank you. I think I'll just lean back and enjoy my vacation.'

'Look at that bonfire over there!' Donner said, indicating the remains of Paradise Cay.

'Keep well to windward and let's go home.'

The blue and white Bell Ranger rose to a thousand feet, settled on a comfortable course over the blue water, and flew off toward Nassau.

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